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started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



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Pathways of Bhakti

Vol. 113, No. 8

THE ROAD TO WISDOM

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON Honour

The Most Venerable

THE moral, ethical, and spiritual relations between soul and soul and between individual spirits and the Father of all spirits, were there before their discovery, and would remain even if we forgot them. The discoverers of these laws are called Rishis, and we honour them as perfected beings. ... Some of the very greatest of them were women. ... Not even the greatest king could pass by the hermitages, or Ashramas as they were called, without going to pay homage to the sages, for such honour and respect was felt for these holy men.

The Indian Idea of Honour

Such is human ignorance, that if anyone's ancestors were men whom society honoured, even if they were brutish, if they were robbers, even robber barons, everyone of us would try to trace our ancestry to them. ... In every other country the highest honour belongs to the Kshatriya—the man of the sword. The Pope of Rome will be glad to trace his descent to some robber baron on the banks of the Rhine. In India, the highest honour belongs to the man of peace—the Sharman, the Brahmin, the man of God. The greatest Indian king would be gratified to trace his descent to some ancient sage who lived in the forest, probably a recluse, possessing nothing, dependent upon the villagers for his daily necessities, and all his life trying to solve the problems of this life and the life hereafter.



The Price of Honour

The general policy of our national law-givers was to give ... this honour. ... But the law does not allow him ever to become rich. The law grinds him down to poverty—only, it gives him this honour. He cannot do a thousand things; and the higher is the caste in the social scale, the more restricted are its enjoyments. The higher the caste, the less the number of kinds of food that man can eat, the less the amount of food that man may eat, the less the number of occupations [he may] engage in. To you, his life would be only a perpetual train of hardships—nothing more than that. It is a perpetual discipline in eating, drinking, and everything; and all [penalties] which are required from the lower caste are required from the higher ten times more.

How to Become Venerable

By doing well the duty which is nearest to us, the duty which is in our hands now, we make ourselves stronger; and improving our strength in this manner step by step, we may even reach a state in which it shall be our privilege to do the most coveted and honoured duties in life and in society.

From *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*,
1.7, 4.86; 1.374, 4.297; 3.519; 5.240.



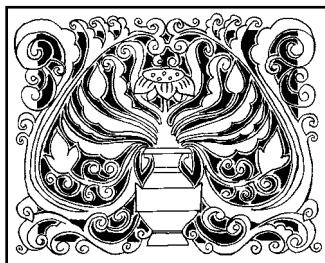
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TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निवोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

Bhakti

August 2008
Vol. 113, No. 8

समेत विश्वा ओजसा पतिं दिवो य एक इद्धूरतिथिर्जनानाम् ।
स पूर्वो नूतनमाजिगीषं तं वर्तनीरनु वावृत एक इत् ॥

Come together, ye all, with the power of the spirit, to the Lord of heaven, who is but one, the guest of the people; He, the ancient, desires to come to the new; to him all pathways turn; verily he is One.

(*Sama Veda*, 372)

द्रुतस्य भगवद्भर्माद्वारावाहिकतां गता ।
सर्वेशो मनसो वृत्तिर्भक्तिरित्यभिधीयते ॥

What is called bhakti is a state of mind in which, being melted by the force of spiritual discipline, the mind constantly flows towards the Lord.

(*Bhaktirasayana*, 1.3)

इष्टे स्वारसिको रागः परमाविष्टा भवेत् ।
तन्मयी या भवेद्भक्तिः सात्र रागात्मिकोदिता ॥

One's own natural affection for one's Chosen Ideal will mature into extreme love; the absorbed state of mind then noticeable is called bhakti, and its essence is love.

(*Bhaktirasamritasindhu*, 1.2.270)

मोक्षकारणसामग्र्यां भक्तिरेव गरीयसी ।
स्वस्वरूपानुसन्धानं भक्तिरित्यभिधीयते ॥

Among things conducive to liberation, devotion alone holds the supreme place; (and) the search for one's real nature is designated as devotion.

(*Vivekachudamani*, 31)

सर्वोपाधिविनिर्मुक्तं तत्परत्वेन निर्मलम् ।
हृषीकेण हृषीकेशसेवनं भक्तिरुच्यते ॥

What is called bhakti is nothing but the enjoyment of the Lord, the master of the senses, with the senses themselves purified by intentness on Him, without laying down any condition whatsoever.

(*Narada Pancharatra*)

THIS MONTH

Numerous are the pathways of bhakti and diverse its symbolism, practices, and manifestations. But **Hearing the Divine Name** is a common first step to the cultivation of bhakti, for the divine name is the seed of the tree of devotion that bears fruit in rich variety.

Though the Bhagavata is considered a quintessential bhakti text, a thorough and unbiased reading would convince us that not only does this scripture present a fine blend of bhakti and jnana, it also harmonizes apparent differences in doctrine and practice. In **Bhagavata Darshana**, philosophy of the Bhagavata, Swami Bhuteshanandaji, twelfth president of the Ramakrishna Order, emphasizes this harmony taught by the Bhagavata.

For the beginner on the path of bhakti, mental purification is a primary concern, and this calls for great discipline. Swami Yatiswaranandaji, former vice president of the Ramakrishna Order, discusses how care in choosing the company one keeps and alertness while confronting old impressions welling up in our minds are important means of **Preparing for Divine Company**.

The *Bhakti Sutra* of Narada is a valuable compendium of the theory and practice of bhakti. While outlining the different facets of bhakti, it underscores the close relationship between jnana and bhakti. With this number we begin serializing Swami Bhaskareswaranandaji's analysis of the **Narada Bhakti Sutra**. The author, former President, Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur, shows how true bhakti is distinct from ordinary emotion and is achieved by transcending all subject-object dichotomy.

Yoga is the quest for the real Self through the control and transcendence of thought. It involves illu-

mining the dark recesses of the unconscious with the light of the Atman. Swami Sarvagatanandaji, Head, Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston, discusses some of the practical aspects of the path of yoga in **Light on Patanjali – I**.

Vithoba of Pandharpur is a widely loved and revered deity. He has been at the focus of the long tradition of saints and sages that has flourished in Maharashtra. Dr Suruchi Pande, Researcher, Department of Sanskrit, University of Pune, takes us on a pilgrimage to Pandharpur and the traditions associated with it.



As executive minister of the Christ Community Church, Grand Haven, Michigan, Mr Ian Lawton is the leader of a dynamic Christian community that believes in progressive thinking and in building interfaith and cross-cultural bridges.

Hinduism and Christianity: A Fine Balance is a reflection of the important convictions that Mr Lawton shares with his community as well as with the larger world.

Swami Tathagatanandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society, New York, recaptures a facet of Albert Einstein's personality that has always fascinated and intrigued his admirers in **Albert Einstein: The Mystic**.

Swami Chetananandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis, continues his study of Girishchandra Ghosh with an examination of **Ramakrishna's Influence on Girish's Plays**. The focus, this month, is on *Vilwamangal*.

EDITORIAL

Hearing the Divine Name

Hast thou not heard the twittering everywhere,
And sound of Anaichattan's mingling voice,
O simple maid? Hast thou not heard the sound
Of churning buttermilk, while dairymaids
With fragrant hair their tinkling necklets toss
From side to side? Child, of the maidens queen,
Still dost thou lie, when thou hast heard the song
To him, Narayanan? To Keshavan?

—Andal, *Tiruppavai*

ANDAL, as the young gopi in the verse above, is all awake in the Divine. The first sounds of dawn send her hurrying to her friends whom she wishes to take along to awaken Krishna, the deity of Vrindavan, and 'secure from him a drum, as a pledge of bliss'. Andal's being is exquisitely alive to divine sounds, and her heart gushes forth in praise of the Divine. The drum symbolizes her commission to sing Krishna's praise and proclaim his glory. The joyous notes of her compositions provide a unique melody to the divine symphony that underpins the universe.

Andal is the soul that not only is awakened but has so lost itself in ecstatic love that its voice is indistinguishable from the voice of the Divine. This ecstatic love or *prema* is 'the rope by which you can tether God, as it were. Whenever you want to see Him you have merely to pull the rope. Whenever you call Him, He will appear before you.' But the paradox about this ability to pull God according to one's will is that 'when *prema* is awakened the devotee not only feels the world to be unreal, but forgets even the body, which everyone loves so intensely'. Having surrendered one's ego to the Divine, the devotee becomes a conduit for the divine Will—a flute for the Divine to play its own melody.

The heights of *prema* attained by Andal are not given to ordinary individuals to scale. But it is in-

deed tragic that the majority of us are deprived of even hearing the divine call. 'That is not available to many even for the mere hearing, (and) which many do not comprehend even on hearing,' declare the Upanishads. This may appear surprising at a time when preachers of virtually every religion, sect, and denomination are actively using all possible means of communication to reach out to people across the entire globe. If the Upanishadic statement still holds true, then the message of the Divine is scripted in a language different from ours.

Listening to the scriptures has an important place in all religious traditions. The Upanishads speak of *shravana* (hearing), *manana* (reflection), and *ni-didhyasana* (meditation) as the means for realization of the Self. Of these, *shravana* is considered the primary as well as immediate means to this realization by an important group of Advaitins. The Self as the eternal subject is the very essence of our being; nothing could have greater immediacy in our consciousness. That we mistake the ego for the self—universally and at all times—is one mystery that has evaded all rational attempts at explanation.

Newborn children are able to distinguish the sound of their own cry from that of others and experience distress when they hear others cry. This is a remarkable example of congenital identification of the self with the psychophysical system as well as proof of the outward direction of mental projections. The *Katha Upanishad* laments that 'the self-existent Supreme Being inflicted great injury on the senses in making them outgoing; hence one sees outer objects but not the inner Self'. If hearing the truth about the Self does not lead to immediate apprehension of the Self, it is because this literal knowledge (*vakyartha*) is too weak to focus the will and turn the mind inward. It is to temper this knowledge

through repeated cogitation and meditation that *manana* and *nididhyasana* are prescribed.

The mind is constantly being moulded by the impressions it receives. An apparently novel piece of knowledge, like the truth about the Self, is immediately confronted by opposing thoughts on entering the mind. These include notions of impossibility, *asambhavana*, and thoughts of a contrary nature, *viparita bhavana*. These are neutralized by dedicated *manana* and *nididhyasana*.

Some Vedanta teachers are of the opinion that *nididhyasana* is more than meditation. Meditation is a mental process, but *nididhyasana* is direct intuition, *vijnana*. We are not able to grasp deep spiritual truths because we are unable to transcend the 'conceptual habits of thought and cannot read the intimations of the spirit independently of thought'. The intellect 'schematizes and makes forms, but the movement of life in its radiance and fragrance is still missed'. It is into this radiance and fragrance that the true devotee enters through bhakti, or devotion, and *bhava*, or divinized emotion.

For the bhakta, *shravana* is hearing about the names, forms, glories, and acts (*lila*) of God. The spoken word has great potency. The convictions and realizations of the speaker and the veracity of what is spoken contribute to the power of the word. God's name is universally recognized as a potent means for approaching the Divine. But even a potent seed needs fertile soil to germinate. Interestingly, besides its denotative power which evokes intellectual associations with spiritual thoughts, God's name is known to have a remarkable purifying influence on the mind. A piece of stirring music can take hold of our being, and the name and utterances of a loved one can have a pervasive influence on our thoughts. *Shravana* of divine names and actions has a similar, albeit more potent, effect. The wise *siddhas* attending Daksha's sacrifice praised Sri Hari: 'The elephant of our mind, burning and thirsty in the forest fire of worldly travails, has taken a dip in the pure nectarine stream of thy excellences and their recital. It is now completely forgetful of that fire, but it refuses to come out of

that blissful river of thy service, even like one united with Brahman.'

Why do we not feel the same stirrings of joy on hearing God's name? That, Sri Ramakrishna tells us, is precisely our disease: 'A typhoid patient has very little chance of recovery if he loses all taste for food; but his life need not be despaired of if he enjoys food even a little. That is why one should cultivate a taste for God's name. Any name will do—Durga, Krishna, or Shiva. Then if, through the chanting of the name, one's attachment to God grows day by day, and joy fills the soul, one has nothing to fear. The delirium will certainly disappear; the grace of God will certainly descend.'

Chanting God's names and prayer are means for attaining devotion. But the true devotee is keenly aware of the need for the breeze of divine grace. This breeze, sages assure us, is always blowing. The music of the unstruck Anahata, the sound of Om arising from the Supreme Brahman, is always filling the universe. We only need to open our being to this influx of the Divine through intense aspiration and have the boundless patience needed to perceive the subtle movements of the divine Will in our being.

One who has managed to enter the stream of true devotion, has become a *srotapanna*, is bound to be carried forward by its current. The faith of the genuine devotee is not contingent on external circumstances. Nistarini Devi was deeply devoted to Sri Ramakrishna. Even in her old age, when she suffered from dropsy, she would not be dissuaded from cooking the Master's offerings: 'What do you mean?' she would say, 'I fed the Master with my own hand. I promised him that I would serve him. Now as long as I am alive, I shall do so.' When her sons told her not to talk about the Master as her devotion to him had been of little avail in their straitened circumstances, she replied: 'What do you say? I love the Master; I have given my heart once for all to him!' This total dedication marks the culmination of the devotee's journey, a journey that begins with *shravana*. As we walk the pathways of bhakti, may we keep our hearts open for genuine *shravana*.

Bhagavata Darshana

Swami Bhuteshananda

AMONGST the Puranas, the Bhagavata has a distinct place in the religious and philosophical tradition of India. The uniqueness of the Bhagavata lies in its vastness, profound depth, and diversity of approach to Reality, as well as in its treatment of all the ten subjects that an ideal Purana must deal with.¹ It is said that this Purana sets the limit for all scholarship—*vidyā bhāgavatāvadhiḥ*. Right from the time of its composition—according to scholars, it took the present form between the sixth and eighth centuries CE—this Purana has become very popular in India. The Bhagavata centres around the personality of Sri Krishna. Krishna is only one of the many avatars of Vishnu, according to the Mahabharata and the *Vishnu Purana*. But in this scripture, he is God himself, ‘*kṛṣṇastu bhagavān svayam*’ (1.3.28). Divided into twelve chapters, called skandhas, this Purana is full of excellent expressions, sweet poetry, and sublime emotions. As one reads the Bhagavata, however, one cannot but doubt at times whether one is reading a huge Upanishad. Such is the terseness and depth of meaning in the shlokas of this Purana.

Bhakti: The Central Note

The main theme of the Bhagavata is bhakti, devotion to Krishna. Through innumerable examples, anecdotes, and thoughtful utterances, the Purana gives a detailed account of bhakti in all its aspects. From preliminary ritualistic devotion, called the *vaidhi bhakti*, to *premā bhakti*, the culmination of love, every stage is illustrated with ample anecdotes and examples. Bhakti, according to the Bhagavata, is that desireless love and boundless devotion to the Supreme Being which ignores even such ultimate goals as mukti.² The Bhagavata does not insist upon any particular pattern of devotion to God. There

are endless ways in which a devotee can delight in God. Of them, a few have been expressed in terms of secular relations. Sometimes we look upon him as our father, sometimes as our brother, and sometimes as the beloved. All these and various other attitudes towards God are possible, and we cannot say that any one is superior to the other; it all depends upon how we look upon him. One can love him in whichever form one likes.

The culmination of bhakti need not be linked to any particular attitude; it can be associated with every form that a bhakta enjoys. But whenever one speaks of the highest type of love—the most mad-dening love—it is in terms of the love of the gopis of Vrindavan. The Bhagavata says that a devotee does not even seek liberation, not to speak of the other pleasures of the world. In the Bhagavata, Bhagavan Kapila says that though devotees be offered the five forms of liberation, they will not accept it; rather, they wish to serve the lotus feet of the Lord eternally.³ The various forms of mukti are *sālokya*, living in the same sphere as God; *sārṣṭi*, having the same powers as God; *sāmīpya*, being close to God; *sārūpya*, having the same form or appearance as God; and *ekatva*, being attached to God.

Now, curiously, this *ekatva* does not mean unity as in monistic thought. It means being part of God. Being one with him means being such things as the different weapons he holds, they being inseparably associated with him [and also having a being of their own]. Such a relationship would be like that of the part to the whole. The bhakta never desires anything but his beloved God. The devotees love God not for any selfish end but for his own sake. Bhakti is not only a means (*sādhana*) but also an end (*sādhyā*) in itself. The gopis of Vrindavan loved Krishna not for any gain. They offered everything

to him and never sought any return.

The gopis' devotion to Krishna is without parallel and has been beautifully illustrated in the Bhagavata. In the 'Gopi Gita', the gopis sing: 'O Friend [Krishna], you are not merely the son of the gopi Yashoda; you are also the witness of the soul [*antarātma-drk*] of all embodied beings.'⁴ The gopis did not think of Krishna as the 'inner controller', *antaryāmin*, or meditate on him thus; they called him *antarātma-drk* only to remind him that he knew what was going on in their hearts, what anguish they were suffering on account of his absence. They said, 'Be gracious and show us your divine face; without seeing you, seconds seem to be aeons.'⁵ The gopis always wanted to be one with Krishna, and that is the ideal of devotion expressed in the Bhagavata. Though at times the unity is expressed in terms of physical union, the analogy must always be understood in terms of the spirit it stands for.

Who is the greatest among devotees according to the Bhagavata? 'He is the greatest among devotees whose mind never swerves even for a moment from the feet of God, though he be offered the wealth of the three worlds.'⁶ Such is the devotion one has to have for God. Such a devotee is loved by the Lord immensely. He has repeatedly said that he remains subservient to such devotees. 'I am subservient to my devotees and have no freedom [as it were] so far as they are concerned. My heart is attracted by them as I am their beloved.'⁷ The Bhagavata abounds with many such beautiful expressions of devotion. But, there is another aspect of the Bhagavata that I would like to touch upon.

Other Facets of the Bhagavata

Though, in the Bhagavata, Sri Krishna is the Supreme Being and bhakti to Krishna is presented as the goal of life, that is not the only thing told there. While defining Reality, the Bhagavata says: 'Those who have realized the Truth say that Reality is non-dual Consciousness.'⁸ There are various shlokas that present the non-dual Reality as supreme. The very first shloka itself begins with an Advaitic tone: 'We

meditate on that supreme Truth from which the creation, maintenance, and dissolution of the universe takes place. That Truth is the material and instrumental cause of the universe. It is called Brahman, and all the worlds subsist in it without in the least affecting it.'

There are many similar passages in the Bhagavata which say that Reality or Brahman is transcendent, without name and form, without qualities, without any change, and Being alone.⁹ Then, how do we see this multifarious universe and how are we to account for diversity? In answer it has been said: '*Bahurūpam ivābhāti māyayā bahurūpayā*; it is owing to maya that we see the many in the one.' So, it is maya that transforms Reality into multiplicity.

The Bhagavata also speaks of other paths like yoga and karma. It is a compendium of various paths. It is therefore hard to specify what the philosophy of the Bhagavata is. The Puranas are given different philosophical interpretations by interpreters belonging to different schools of thought. The Bhagavata is considered the most authoritative text by almost all schools of dualistic thought. Thus Sri Chaitanya, Madhvacharya, Vallabhacharya, and even some Vishishtadvaitins and various sub-sects consider the Bhagavata their authority. There are, however, Advaitic ideas in plenty there, as we have already seen. Some leaders of the different schools of thought mentioned above emphasize—with some vehemence, as it were—that it is their school of thought alone that is upheld by the Bhagavata. To reconcile contradictory passages, sometimes the text has to be interpreted according to the theory these acharyas believe in. This is text-torturing. How this can happen is an enigma.

Seeing beyond One's Views

It is a wonder how great scholars, who are so honest in their interpretations, sincerely believe that the Purana definitely speaks only about the school of thought that they belong to! One reason for this might be that we can rarely go beyond the sect we are loyal to, beyond the limitations of the way of thinking with which we are familiar. We are guided

by our own convictions and prejudices, and this distorts our vision and limits our power of seeing things. Our difficulty is we want to always have a logically consistent view. According to this view 'A' and 'not A' must be opposite. These oppositions can never meet, much like light and darkness. When we see various other commentaries—not just of this Purana but also of other texts like the Bhagavad-gita, the *Brahma Sutra*, and the Upanishads—we find the same problem. The Upanishads, on the whole, stand for the idea of non-duality. Copious passages can be cited to that effect. Yet, there are commentators of dualist schools who have tried to interpret even purely Advaitic passages according to their own sectarian faith.

Therefore, it is no wonder that in the Bhagavata, which is so full of sweet expressions of bhakti, dualistic commentators will find Advaita a jarring note. They either misinterpret such verses by distorting their significance or say that such shlokas are meant for people who are not yet fit to follow the path of bhakti. Such interpretations are there. That is why we need an interpreter who will interpret without any bias, pre-conception, or prejudice. There are verses in this Purana that are to be interpreted according to the beliefs of the bhakti path and there are shlokas which can be subscribed to only by those who believe in an ultimate Principle.

Let me narrate an incident. Once, during the annual celebrations in one of our ashramas, a Bhagavata reading was to take place. The scholar who was to give the talk on the Purana was present. But, right at the moment the class was to begin, he was not to be found anywhere. Things came to such a pass that the item itself would have had to be dropped. I was then asked to fill in for the pandit. I had to agree and sat down to interpret the scripture. Just when I had begun, the pandit appeared, as if from nowhere. Seeing him, I said, 'Please come and take your seat. We have been waiting for you. Not finding you anywhere, they wanted me to fill the gap.' But, the pandit said: 'No, Swamiji, please go on; I have come to listen to you. I need not displace you.' So I continued and gave the interpretation of a select por-

tion of the text as I found correct. The pandit sat through the whole talk and then took leave. The next day, he came with a number of his followers. I guessed that there was something behind this. He said that my interpretation was nice. But, was it not sectarian? I was expecting that sort of remark. I replied: 'I do not know. I know there are various interpretations belonging to different schools of thought and I am not sure whether my commentary is the correct one. I do not have the audacity to say that this is the only interpretation possible. However, I must tell you with all humility that I have closely followed the *Bhavartha Dipika* of Sridhara Swami.' The gentleman was a staunch Vaishnava. He found my interpretation too Advaitic and therefore not in tune with the theme of the Bhagavata. But, when I mentioned that I had followed Sridhara Swami, he became silent. This was because Sri Chaitanya, the leader of the Bengal school of Vaishnavism, has said that following Sridhara Swami is a must for a Vaishnava: He who does not follow the explanation of Sridhara is not loyal to the Swami. Incidentally, 'Swami' also means 'the Lord'.

God is omnipotent. He transforms himself, through his power of maya, into various forms—from Brahma the Creator to the blade of grass, *ābrahma-stamba-paryanta*. But, according to the Bhagavata, there are two kinds of maya. One is *guna māyā* and the other *ātma māyā*. *Guṇa māyā* consists of the three *guṇas*: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*; with the help of these God creates the diverse things in the universe. But there is another kind of maya called *ātma māyā*, his 'own maya', with the help of which he assumes different forms. And these forms are not illusory. They are all truly divine forms. The world may be an illusion but not the different forms of God. The one confounds and confuses, the other helps devotees enjoy the bliss of God in various ways. These distinctions are accepted by the bhakti cult. But a sadhaka following the path of knowledge will never subscribe to such views. For him, there is only one Reality, and that is non-dual. That is the difficulty. We are thus taking extreme views and never thinking of the consistency that may be found in

these apparently conflicting ideas. The idea that God is formless appears contrary to the idea that God is with form. If one is true, the other must be false. With such an attitude aspirants can never have any exchange of ideas and their growth will be stunted.

Transcending Contradictions

Nevertheless, there are exceptions. Luckily for us, we have the great blessing of having some acquaintance with the ideas of Sri Ramakrishna. We have been given to understand that the diversity of interpretation does not mar the beauty of the unity of ideas. This concept we find in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* also. There we see Sri Ramakrishna telling his audience that bhakti is the only path that can be followed in the Kali Yuga. Again, perhaps in the same sitting, he mentions something else which only an established non-dualist can say. According to him there is no conflict between these two ideas, or various other ideas. This is because all these are different approaches for the realization of the ultimate Truth. Swami Vivekananda was expressing the same idea when he said, 'Truth can be stated in a thousand different ways, yet each one can be true.'¹⁰ All the phases of truth that are apparently conflicting merge into the Absolute, which is above all difference. 'Truth is one, sages call it by diverse names,' says the Veda; and each of the 'diverse names' has a vast following!

Sri Ramakrishna says that the ocean has no particular form, but due to the influence of cold, we find its water becoming ice, which has form. So also, the devotees' devotion can compel God to assume forms. I say 'compel' deliberately, because God is always governed by the devotees' love.¹¹ So, a devotee has the power to compel God to assume forms. Devotion is that influence by means of which God is persuaded to accept forms; and how many diverse forms he assumes!

But when the sun shines, or when one takes the path of knowledge, with the illumination of the darker corners of one's life, the 'ice' melts and the various forms are merged into the formless Being. The change into forms cannot be permanent. There-

fore, they are not the Reality; only the formless Being is real. However, Sri Ramakrishna hastens to add: 'But you may say that for certain devotees God assumes eternal forms. There are places in the ocean where the ice doesn't melt at all.'¹² In such places, God is always with form. Sri Ramakrishna says that 'God has form and He is formless too. Further, He is beyond both form and formlessness' (192). What that 'beyond both' is like, is not for us to conceive.

We have to transcend all conceptions, and when we do that we have no words to give expression to our experience. Sri Ramakrishna's position is distinct from that of the followers of the path of knowledge and also from that of those following the path of devotion. He was not considered a scholar. He never tried to write a book to resolve these conflicting views and find a synthesis. But, his words throw a new light on this subject and we can find wonderful harmony in the midst of all these conflicts. I think we are bound to arrive at this view even on study of the Bhagavata, provided we follow its teachings without any kind of prejudice or pre-conception. Let us take the shlokas as they are and then we are bound to come to this conclusion.

Followers of the spirit of the Bhagavata should necessarily come to a stage where they enjoy God with various forms and where again they enjoy the Divine without any attributes. Sri Ramakrishna says that one cannot enjoy lila, the play of God, without being established in the ultimate Reality. Nor can one have the full sense of God-realization unless one has direct experience of God's various lillas. Both are mutually complementary and do not exclude each other.

The Bhagavata is unique. There are few works with such beautiful expressions and ideas in such lucid form as this. It teaches bhakti, but does not lack in expositions of the Absolute as well. It has to be studied with a spirit of devotion, synthesis, and harmony. If we can see both sides with equal emphasis, equal sympathy, and equal loyalty, we can see wonderful harmony in these apparently conflicting ideas—for the Bhagavata is the supreme scripture of harmony.

Notes and References

1. The Bhagavata is distinguished by the ten subjects it discusses. These are: *sarga* (formation of the gross universe), *visarga* (evolution of living beings), *sthāna* (maintenance of the world order), *poṣāṇa* (protection of the righteous), *manvantara* (rules of righteous living as illustrated in great lives), *āti* (karmic tendencies), *īśānukathā* (description of divine incarnations), *nirodha* (dissolution), *mukti* (liberation), and *āśraya* (the Supreme Being). (Bhagavata, 2.10.1)
2. Bhagavan Kapila defines transcendent devotion thus: 'When, by the mere hearing of my excellences, the mind streams forth towards me—the Supreme Being, the Presence within the hearts of all—like the waters of the Ganga into the sea, unmotivated, unrestricted, and one-pointed, that love is called "bhakti that transcends the *gunas*".' (3.29.11)
3. सालोक्यसार्थिसामीप्यसास्त्व्यैकत्वमप्युत ।
दीयमानं न गृह्णन्ति विना मत्सेवनं जनाः ॥ (3.29.13)
4. न खलु गोपिकानन्दनो भवानखिलदेहिनामन्तरात्मदक् ।
(10.31.4)
5. युगायितं निमेषेण चश्चूषा प्रावृषायितम् ।
शून्यायितं जगत्सर्वं गोविन्दविरहेण मे ॥ (Sri Chaitanya,
6. त्रिभुवनविभवहेतवेऽप्यकण्ठस्मृतिः
अजितात्मसुरादिभिर्विमुग्यात् ।
न चलति भगवत्पदरविन्दात्
लवनिमिषार्धमपि यः स वैष्णवाग्रयः ॥
(Bhagavata, 11.2.53)
7. अहं भक्तपराधीनो ह्यस्वतन्त्र इव द्विज ।
सात्युभिर्यस्त्वहृदयो भक्तैर्भक्तजनप्रियः ॥ (9.4.63)
8. वदन्ति तत्त्वविदस्तत्त्वं यज्ज्ञानमद्यम् । (1.2.11)
9. Mother Devaki thus praises Vishnu when he is born of her womb as Krishna: 'You are verily Mahavishnu, the Light Spiritual, who is described as the first, the unmanifest, the vast, the luminous, the one beyond the *gunas*, the changeless, the pure being, the unmodified, and the desireless.' (10.3.24)
10. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 5.410.
11. See note 7 above.
12. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 191.

Bhakti as a Source of Harmony

In Meerut, I came to know of a functional joint family system called Grihastha Ashrama having nearly sixty to seventy members. This system is working on three important principles: (i) treating everyone as a manifestation of God; (b) implicit faith in the mercy of God; and (c) steadfast dependence on the chanting of His name.

Since I had heard so much about this spiritual family, I visited it during my recent trip to Meerut. I saw the family consisting of grandparents and grandchildren. The extended family—from the young to the experienced—had come from different parts of Meerut. All of them explained how their life got transformed after coming into contact with this family. I was observing how they had achieved this transformation. When I observed them during their bhajan, I found that they all enjoyed every verse and were bubbling with enthusiasm. In short, during the prayer period the whole family was in a new state of cheerfulness. When I interacted with the members, there was a revelation: whatever they did, they did for God. Their work is highly inter-linked with divinity. For example, the gardener feels

he is gardening to get flowers for worshipping God. The decorator of the divine place has the mission of beautifying it. The kirtan group of the family composed the vocal music and used musical instruments to generate appropriate tunes to suit the divine environment. A divine rhythm emanates because they are singing the glories of God with passion. For the head of the family, all the family members, and whoever assembled there, were images of God. Regarding their profession, each member—whether undergoing education or pursuing a career—felt that the divine family environment had enhanced their performance in every activity and made them happy and contented.

This type of divine environment of the joint family system may be existing in many places in the country, in many religious environments. Such harmony in homes will definitely bring order in the nation and thereby peace in the world.

—Edited excerpt from the speech by Dr A P J Abdul Kalam while releasing A Concise Encyclopaedia of Hinduism at Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore, on 31 May 2008.

Preparing for Divine Company

Swami Yatiswarananda

ONE of the chief characteristics of true bhakti or devotion is that our love for the world and worldly things keeps getting less and less. Whenever we find that in spite of following the spiritual path our attachment is not getting less, our love for the phenomenal world is not decreasing, we should know that there is something seriously wrong with our spiritual practice. Sri Ramakrishna pointed out that *vairagya*, or renunciation, means 'dispassion for the world and love for God'.

You must cultivate more and more the tendency to associate only with good people, with people who are pure-minded, for if you do not consciously avoid impure company, you will be unable to destroy the evil or impure tendencies in your own mind. All impure men and women with whom you associate awaken in you—in a very subtle way—your impure thoughts, either in the form of desire or in the form of disgust, and disgust is only desire with a negative sign. There are many people who say that one must experience all the different experiences of life oneself. But, how do you know what experience you have already had in your previous lives? If you really want to pass through all experiences yourself, then your mind will be so weak and full of ruts in the end that nothing will be possible in spiritual life. In that case you would merely want to offer your dirt

This compilation from the notes of Vedanta students on Swami Yatiswarananda's classes on the *Narada Bhakti Sutra* has been prepared by Swami Brahmeshananda, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh. The notes have been obtained through Mr Kurt Friedrichs, Hamburg, and Mr John Manetta, Athens, and have been minimally edited.

and filth to God.

People often find nice theories to justify their own worldly conduct. We turn sceptics because it is comfortable for us to be sceptics, because it justifies our own conduct to some extent. As a result of your worldly conduct your body becomes diseased, your mind weakened, no energy is left for spiritual practices, and what spiritual path could be followed with such a worthless body and such a worthless mind? No, this theory of experience is out-and-out wrong, because very few find their way to spiritual life in this manner. The others become diseased in body and mind and can never regain their energies in this life. Besides, how can you pass through *all* experiences of life yourself?

When you handle a flower to smell it, you press it; then it becomes rotten. And then you dare to offer it to God. If you want to offer body and mind to God, why not do it now? Why offer them when they have become tainted and diseased?

Avoidance of Worldly Thought

The company of bad friends may be given up very easily; we may easily avoid worldly company and worldly talk. But the internal company of our former worldly friends and former impure thoughts is far more troublesome. What to do with them? *They* are the real danger in our spiritual life. First of all, energetically cut yourself away from all old associations and from the sources of the stimuli that tend to awaken your old impure ideas, thoughts, and desires; then, without accumulating fresh dirt, without making new worldly friends, try to clean all corners of your mind. Do away with the old accumulated dirt, that old dirt of ages. Without exercising great discrimination

in the company we choose and in our talk and thought, this cleaning process becomes an impossibility, and without this cleaning process no spiritual path can be followed.

Even if we be very careful, we find that in the course of the day we gather at least some dirt—this may be in a very subtle form—some deep impressions that are harmful to spiritual life. Never make light of the company you are in, of the talks you are having. Stop all gossiping, all idle thinking, all random activity. All these are very harmful to the spiritual aspirant. Make it a point to use the utmost discrimination in all this. Do not go and accumulate new dirt through new worldly associations.

In the course of the day you should act in such a manner that you would be able to undo what is done. The whole account is to be altogether squared up so that the balance becomes nil. There should neither be a positive balance nor any negative account. There should be no craving for fresh worldly company and worldly talk. The whole spiritual life lies in this fearless adjustment. Today, all of you have a minus balance; and now, you must earn sufficiently to square up the account. Only then may a new account be opened.

Countering Old Mental Impressions

There are many things that are lying hidden in the corners of the mind, and when we begin stirring them up, they will arise and become very troublesome. You will be astonished to find how much dirt has accumulated in all the nooks and corners of your mind, and what a lot of cleaning is needed before you can successfully proceed on your spiritual path.

Our mind may be likened to a gramophone record with all its lines. Everything is recorded there. But see how small and insignificant the lines look! You would never think that they produce such a noise, that every single note of every single instrument is recorded in them and can be heard. It is the same with our mind. When one comes to have fewer and fewer impressions from outside, when one begins to avoid all dangerous outside

stimuli, then this nice music of old impressions goes on and on. But this is an unavoidable stage and must be overcome. After having got rid of the outside stimulus, we should control the inner stimulus, lying hidden in the mind, ever ready to come up. We should stop all the wild thinking of wild thoughts. Very often, if we are not sufficiently introspective, we find that these outside stimuli leave impressions, and at some time or other these impressions which are unknown to us are going to create some serious trouble for us. All these thoughts and pictures arise especially during meditation, and then you must be able to bring very strong and definite counter-thoughts, thoughts that are clearer and stronger, pictures that are more definite than those old impressions rising in your mind. Very often this means tremendous struggle.

The semi-conscious thinking along impure, evil lines is a very dangerous thing and may create great trouble, as it makes the impressions all the more deep and lasting. One day you will realize how true all this is. You should be very very careful about what impressions you allow yourself to take in and what talks you indulge in or listen to. Never think there is no danger in them because you do not feel that any impression is being made. The impression will come up later, and then you will be at a loss what to do with it.

Never dwell on old impressions, on old associations, on old worldly company and thoughts, not even subconsciously or semi-consciously. This is one of the greatest dangers for the spiritual aspirant who really wants to go through the necessary cleaning process. There must be a definite cut, and then: thinking along new lines; new, good associations; new, good, pure thoughts and ideas.

Be as wide awake as possible so as not to take in bad impressions either through the eye, or through the ear; and if you do take them in, root them out immediately. Use your utmost discrimination as to the company you allow yourself to be in and the things you allow yourself to hear.

Our mind is very much like a photographic plate. If we could project what lies hidden in it—

one picture after the other—what a nice cinema-show that would make! Everything gets recorded, mercilessly, and very often we would shudder if we could see all that lies hidden in the depths of our mind, all the impressions that are unknown to us, that we have taken in semi-consciously or subconsciously, and that are bound to rise sooner or later during our sadhana.

Purity is the *sine qua non* of all spiritual life, and real bhakti (devotion) can never be had without perfect purity in body and mind. The jnani purifies himself through tremendous self-control, the bhakta by directing all his feelings and passions towards the Lord, making the Lord the only thought of his mind.

You [the aspirants who are seriously committed to the spiritual path] must not allow yourselves to have direct relations with others. Your country and all others may only be loved through God and in God, never in any other manner; otherwise you will entangle yourselves in the meshes of God's maya.

In time you will come to realize the extraordinary usefulness of the personal ideal, the *ishta*, for your sadhana. The advantage of the personal ideal, the *ishta*, is that when the heart longs after a personal relationship, the devotee will not be allured and tempted to descend to the animal plane and to take up false human relationships. Real devotion for the *ishta* always acts as a brake. The *ishta*, as it were, says: 'Look here, you shouldn't be allowed to go down any further!'

First, the Lord watches the aspirant, seeing what he is and what he does. Later, if he finds that the aspirant is worthy of serving as an instrument for his cause, he does everything else. He gets the necessary money and all that is needed for his work. But first the aspirant has to prove his sincerity, purity, and worth. Nobody is allowed to serve Sri Ramakrishna who is not perfectly pure in body and mind, nobody who has got any personal ambition to satisfy. And if he is not pleased, nothing happens—whatever the aspirant may do, or not do. 

Watchfulness

One should never be careless in one's steadfastness to Brahman. Bhagavan Sanatkumara, Brahma's son, has termed inadvertence death itself.

There is no greater danger for the jnani than carelessness about his own real nature. From this comes delusion, thence egoism; this is followed by bondage, and finally comes misery.

As sedge, even if removed, does not stay away even for a moment but covers the water again, so maya or nescience covers even a wise man if he is averse to meditation on the Self.

If the mind ever so slightly strays away from the ideal and becomes outgoing, then it goes down and down, just as a play-ball inadvertently dropped on the staircase bounds down from one step to another.

The mind that is attached to the sense objects reflects on their qualities; from mature reflection arises desire, and after desiring, a man sets about having those things.

Hence, to the discriminating knower of Brahman there is no worse death than inadvertence with regard to concentration. But the man who is concentrated attains complete success. Therefore, carefully concentrate your mind on Brahman.

Through inadvertence a man deviates from his real nature, and the man who has thus deviated falls. The fallen man invariably comes to ruin, but is never seen to rise up again.

Therefore, one should give up reflecting on sense-objects, which is the root of all mischief. He who is completely aloof even while living, is alone aloof after the dissolution of the body. The Yajur Veda declares that there is fear for one who sees the least bit of distinction.

Whenever the wise man sees the least difference in the infinite Brahman, at once, that which he sees as different through mistake, becomes a source of terror to him.

—Vivekachudamani, 321-2, 324-30

Narada Bhakti Sutra

Swami Bhaskareswarananda

DEVOTION is the science of spiritual life. It is the beginning, development, and culmination of spirituality. *Nāradīyā bhakti* is the psychological science of real bhakti. It should not be confused with emotion. It is actually suprarational. Without bhakti, spiritual life has no meaning. So also karma and philosophy are meaningless without it. We find a current of bhakti flowing from beginning to end in the lives of all the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna.

We generally identify bhakti with rituals and paraphernalia or with weeping and such expressions of emotion. But bhakti is actual love for God. Real bhakti refers to the total destruction of 'I' and 'mine'—no individuality, everything totally illumined by 'Thou and Thou alone'. In this sense it is equivalent to the spiritual realization attained through the path of knowledge. This is *parā-bhakti*. The same truth of one Reality—'Thou and Thou alone'—when realized through the psychological path of feeling is called bhakti. This is real bhakti, transcendental bhakti, *parā-bhakti*, *Nāradīyā bhakti*—the absolute effacement of 'I' through love.

Swami Bhaskareswarananda (1897–1976) was born in West Bengal and obtained his bachelor's degree from the University of Calcutta. His intense eagerness for God-realization brought him in close contact with his guru, Swami Shivananda (Mahapurush Maharaj). He joined the Ramakrishna Order in 1922 at Ramakrishna Math, Bhubaneswar, and had sannyasa from his guru in 1923. He was the first president of the Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur, where he stayed from 1928 till his passing away. He was highly respected for his spiritual insight. We present here the first instalment of the edited notes of his classes on the *Narada Bhakti Sutra*, taken down by some residents of the Nagpur Math. The classes were conducted between 17 December 1965 and 24 January 1966.

To achieve this bhakti, there are certain conditions to be met, which have been indicated in the first sutra.

1. *Athāto bhakti vyākhyāsyāma* .

Now, therefore, we shall expound bhakti.

Narada begins the text with the word *atha*. *Atha* means *anantara*, after. That means there are certain conditions for attainment of bhakti. Without certain psychological preparations or qualifications, there cannot be any question of bhakti.

The first qualification is intense aspiration. If there is no aspiration, devotion will be merely a pretence, a show. True aspiration is really the beginning of the path of devotion. It will not do to say, 'It will be very nice if I realize God.' We must feel that without God, or spiritual realization, life is meaningless; there is nothing else to be done in life, except to realize God. The sadhaka must have such aspiration.

Aspiration or restlessness could arise as a reaction to bereavement, loss, or some setback in life. This is not genuine. Genuine aspiration is born out of *anitya-bodha*—that is, the conviction that the world is unreal. This again must come from *nitya-anitya vastu viveka* or discrimination between the eternal and the ephemeral. Aspiration must be based on *vairāgya*, and *vairāgya* must be based on the knowledge of Reality, without which all else is zero. Such knowledge alone conduces to real *vairāgya* and real aspiration in turn. Thus, the transcendental insight that the world is nothing must be based on the knowledge of the reality of the One without a second.

Aspiration and insight alone are not enough if one simply sits quiet and does not struggle. The aspirant must have a sincere pull for sadhana. Just

I **contemplate an immolation** of myself at thy feet;
 But the river of desire carries me away.
 No swimmer other than thee can rescue me;
 So throw yourself into the river—clothings and
 all—and rescue me.
 The necklace of the nine jewels of devotion is sub-
 merged in the waters, the gourds (floats) of cour-
 age and discrimination have been smashed to
 pieces.
 Faith, the rope of hope, has been sundered in twain,
 The shark called anger is intent on dragging me to
 the river bed.
 Pleads Namadeva, dive quickly into the stream and
 save me.

—Namadeva

as we cannot live without eating and, hence, have a natural desire for food, so also we must have a sincere desire for sadhana, with the conviction that without sadhana spiritual life is impossible. It is through sincere sadhana that aspiration and insight bear fruit. Sadhana means the attempt to experience the ultimate Reality as the reality of our very being. Then alone will one be able to proceed in spiritual life. A sincere desire and inclination for sadhana further increases *adhibhāra*, the fitness of the aspirant. Only being a bhakta won't do; you must be a sadhaka too. Sadhana will intensify and purify your psychological frame and your *adhibhāra* for spiritual life will increase. *Adhibhāra* is the capacity to feel the Reality.

Even when all these conditions are fulfilled, maya might attack the sadhaka with egotistical thoughts: 'I am a sadhaka, I am different from others'; then all preparations become futile, like a bowlful of rice pudding contaminated by a drop of urine. Therefore, the *Bhakti Sutra* later addresses the need for egolessness behind all spiritual practice. The sadhaka must feel the divine grace, or in other words, egoless consciousness: 'I have no reality, I have no power of my own, so how can I say I am doing sadhana?' Such I-lessness is designated in bhakti as divine grace.

Divine grace does not mean sitting idle. There should be sincere sadhana together with the consciousness of divine grace and with the feeling that sadhana by 'myself' is not sufficient. Narada will show the value of the help provided by real saints. Many things appear right due to our emotions and preconceived notions, though they might be wrong. One may think, 'I am following the path of freedom,' but in reality one might be following the path of absolute bondage to samskaras. Hence, the help of saints has a very important place among the preconditions of bhakti. Without acquiring these essential preconditions, there cannot be any question of bhakti.

There are some other conditions which a bhakta cannot afford to overlook. One must cultivate the faculty of discrimination, *viveka*, and with its help live in the world in such a way that the world may not produce any effect on one's being. Ramanuja calls it avoidance of *annadoṣa*, defects of food. Shankaracharya, however, speaks of the *dosas*, faults, of all sense contact. The idea is to live without being affected by the world. Live at a higher mental level and never have association with tempting objects of the senses.

Ramanuja also talks of freedom from desires, *vimoka*. Never indulge in fulfilment of desires, otherwise life will be destroyed, as if blown away by a cyclone. Make it a principle; otherwise, bhakti will not remain. As long as you are a sadhaka, you must eschew all desires. This must be accepted on principle. If you give up indulgence in desires on principle then you will be free from psychological reactions.

Ramanuja also speaks of *abhyāsa*, *kriyā*, and *kalyāṇa*. Only observing 'don'ts' or abstentions, without performing sadhana, will be ineffective. You must change the direction of your life through *abhyāsa*, repeated practice. If the direction is towards enjoyment, control will be of no avail. Narada will show how sadhana changes the direction of one's life. *Kriyā* means doing good to others with feeling. Only *kriyā* done with feeling can be called sadhana, mere mechanical *kriyā* is useless. *Kalyāṇa*

means moral qualities. They too have spiritual value only if they are linked with feeling; then they help in the development of the inner personality, enabling us to love God.

Ramanuja then speaks of *anavasāda* and *anuddharsa*. *Avasāda* or depression hinders spiritual life. Hence, it must be avoided. How? By cheerfulness, which means joyful tranquillity—tranquillity with the power of joyfully facing all difficulties and problems. Ramanuja calls it *anuddharsa*, joyfulness without excitement due to excessive elation. Otherwise, joy will be followed by a negative reaction; the sadhaka will become *bahirmukha* or extrovert, and lower impulses like lust and greed will arise.

If the sadhaka puts these principles advocated by Ramanuja into practice, then his or her bhakti will be well grounded and stable. *Nāradīyā bhakti* is based on such psychological training, and not on mere dancing and singing.

When Narada finds these prerequisites fulfilled in the sadhaka—*atha*—he, then—*atah*—feels a tremendous urge within himself to open his own treasure of experiences for the sadhaka, to share with such a sadhaka his experience of *brahmajñāna*, which he has attained through bhakti. These pre-conditions fulfilled by a sadhaka create an urge in Narada, the real guru. He does not talk or teach because the devotees have asked him to do so, but the fulfilment of the preconditions creates an urge in him to share what he has attained through bhakti. The expression '*bhaktim vyākhyāsyāmaḥ*' means the objective expression of his personal realization of Brahman through bhakti. *Vyākhyāsyāmaḥ* does not mean commentary by a scholar, but an expression of experience in contact with a fit recipient. When the preconditions are fulfilled, only then will the gates of bhakti be opened fully by the true giver. We also find here the qualities of the giver. His personality is perfect and an urge is created in him spontaneously to give to a fit recipient.

So our study must not be merely to gather information; it should be for assimilation and practice of the fundamental principles of the life of a sadhaka as taught by the man of realization, Narada.

2. *Sā tvasmin parama-prema-rūpā.*

But that is of the nature of supreme love for It (God).

In the *Bhakti Sutra* Narada is presenting the science of devotion. Although there is information about devotion, we must feel and experience the nature of devotion to make our life blessed. The bhakta's psyche is dominated by 'feeling'. He must train and purify his feelings, by which he gets psychological *adhibhāra*, competence, for bhakti.

Now, when the bricks for building one's devotional life—that is, aspiration and the urge for sadhana—are ready, Narada states the fundamental principle of spiritual life: love. Without the cement of love, the bricks will not unite; they will be of no use. This force of love for God is the main force for building spiritual life. Narada describes it as absolute love for the absolute Reality: *asmin parama-prema-rūpā*. In the absolute Reality—the One without a second—nothing else exists. Hence, Narada does not give any name to it, but indicates it by *asmin*. Love Sri Ramakrishna, not as a man, but as the absolute Reality. Then only will you have real divine love, then only will the world and 'I' disappear, and only He will remain. Narada clearly stresses this point. This is transcendental love and not empirical love based on the subject-object relationship. The Beloved is the absolute Reality without which nothing else exists and towards which the bhakta has to feel transcendental love, love without 'I' and 'mine'. This fundamental consciousness of love will bring tranquillity and transcendental experience to the devotee, making his or her personality perfect.

We find a shining example of this in the gopis of Vrindavan. They had real love. There was no emotionalism or lust in their love. They had the fundamental consciousness regarding the true nature of Sri Krishna, which made them love him with transcendental love: '*Na khalu gopikānandano bhavān-akhila-dehinām-antarātma-dṛk*; you are not merely the son of a gopi, but the witness of the inner essence of all embodied beings.' This is *parama prema*.

If the bhakta has a dualistic consciousness, he might dance with emotional excitement. But that

is not *parama prema*. This is the reason why Sri Krishna disappears from the presence of the gopis as soon as they have the least ripple of ego: 'We are superior.' Wherever there is 'I', there *parama prema* cannot be, and God disappears. That is why Narada says that no 'I' in any form is acceptable in *parama prema*. After the disappearance of Sri Krishna, the gopis, due to their love, transcended even the sense of difference between *cetana* and *acetana*, living and non-living, and lost all ego-sense. Then Sri Krishna reappeared and told them that he could not bear the slightest trace of ego. Wherever 'I' is not, there God is.

As long as the bhakta feels separate from God, so long God cannot be. When, due to illumination, the bhakta loses his or her separate identity, only then does God appear. To elucidate this, Sri Krishna describes three types of love: the lowest, where love is expected in return; higher than this is the love of the mother without desire for return, because of the element of unselfishness in it; the highest is the love in which there is no separation of lover and beloved. This identity expressed as love is *parama-prema-rūpā*, of the nature of supreme love. Thus, before becoming a bhakta, you must know what bhakti is, what you are, and what you are to be.

In the first sutra, Narada said he would describe bhakti. But now he says it cannot be described. This is indicated by the term *parama-prema-rūpā*. In description there is duality. In supreme bhakti there is no duality. The term *rūpā*, 'of the nature of', points to this transcendental nature of supreme love.

The particle *tu* also indicates that bhakti is different from dualistic consciousness. This ideal divine love is altogether different from ordinary love or bhakti. As soon as we say 'bhakti' we generally think of some sort of love, because of our dualistic consciousness. But true bhakti is absolutely different from ordinary love. Ordinary love does not require preparedness for total sacrifice of individuality. 'I am one with you' is the ordinary consciousness. But the ideal is: 'I am not, you alone are.' This is the meaning of *tu*.

Where there is the thought of 'I', there is no real

love. Such bhakti, in which there is 'I', could be out of fear—worshipping God for passing examinations, for promotions, or for favour from superiors. One may even feel a fervour in such prayers. One may even pray to God for fulfilment of lustful desires! Thus, the particle *tu* shows the vast gap between imperfect love and transcendental love.

Look at Sri Ramakrishna's attitude. He tells the Divine Mother: 'This (pointing to his own body) is but a perforated drum, and if you go on beating it day in and day out, how long will it last?' He had no I-consciousness. The Divine Mother is the beater of the drum and the drum is the instrument of her lila.

First of all, we must appreciate the difference between dualistic consciousness and the absolute Consciousness of a realized devotee. Then, we must gradually evolve through moral and spiritual preparation, which Narada will describe in the section on *vaidhi bhakti*, formal devotion, and through which the devotee reaches *parama prema*.

Generally it is found that bhaktas do not stress moral perfection because they consider bhakti to be mere emotion. But ordinary emotion is nothing but a biological impulse which makes people lustful and leads to ruin. Hence, by the word *tu* Narada implies that it is not emotion, it is *asmin parama-prema-rūpā*.

3. Am ta-svarūpā ca.

It is of the nature of immortal bliss too.

We must clearly grasp the transcendental nature of bhakti wherein there is no 'I' but only 'Thou'. Bhakti, bhakta, and Bhagavan are three forms of the same absolute Reality. Sri Jnaneshwar gives the example of the rock from which the images of Bhagavan, the bhakta, and the instruments [of devotion] are carved out. The absolute Reality is stressed at the very outset by the word *asmin*, 'for It'. The corresponding transcendental Consciousness merging all in God is supreme bhakti or *parā bhakti*. Such bhakti itself is moksha. This transcendental Consciousness, the *saccidānanda-svarūpa*, is naturally present in all beings [though we are unaware of

it]. When, through love, the 'I' is completely transcended, nothing else remains to be achieved. This is the state of realization of Brahman. So, *parā bhakti* and *amṛtattva*, immortality, are the names of the same Consciousness. Absolute Love and realization of the absolute Reality are one and the same. To have real bhakti you are bound to transcend the world and your individuality through supreme *vairāgya*.

4. *Yallabdhvā pumān siddho bhavati,*

am to bhavati, t pto bhavati.

Having gained which man becomes perfect, immortal, and contented.

One cannot become a real bhakta by mere claims and declarations. Bhakti results in the complete transformation of personality. So, after describing *parā bhakti*, Narada describes the signs of its attainment. If you understand the nature of *parā bhakti* and the criteria for its attainment, then an urge to realize it will arise in you, and your life will definitely be transformed. Therefore, Narada says *yallabdhvā*, having gained which, emphasizing what follows:

Siddho bhavati; becomes perfect. If you have bhakti, which is the same as realization, then there must be perfection in your personality. Perfection follows such a person like a shadow. That person will have a never-failing, perfect character.

Amṛto bhavati; becomes immortal. This perfection is not like any ordinary person's moral perfection. A moralist may never commit a crime; a *para-bhakta*, true bhakta, also does not commit crime. But there is a difference. The *para-bhakta*'s personality is absolutely divine. He has transcended the subject-object dichotomy, and consequently absolute Divinity or God finds expression through him.

Trpto bhavati; becomes contented. Absolute satisfaction is inevitable. It is not that he attains all worldly objects and has no wants. Actually there is no question of wants in such a state because there is no consciousness of subject-object duality. The basis of *atrpti*, discontent, is the attribution of reality to this duality. Real *trpti* does not depend

on any object; it is not a second-hand *trpti*. There is no enjoyer or enjoyed when the absolute Reality, Satchidananda, Brahman, is realized. The *ānanda-svarūpa*, blissful nature, of bhakti manifests in the life of the bhakta.

Study your life in the light of these characteristics of *parā bhakti*. These criteria of achievement are also the criteria of progress. Are you advancing towards perfection, that is, attaining natural self-control due to transcendence? Are you getting beyond pulls and imperfections? Is your being divinely awakened? Are you living in God? Has God become your all in all, your *sarvasva*? Genuine divine feeling automatically takes one beyond the imperfections and attractions of the world. This perfection based on divine awakening is the chief criterion of bhakti. The drag towards the world is caused by discontent. But when you have perfection due to divine love, there will simultaneously be an absence of attraction for the objects of enjoyment. There will then be no question of trying for self-control. The world will be seen as nothing. *Atrpti* is the result of pulls due to the taking of the shadow as real.

When *parā bhakti* is achieved, then the Reality is seen as true and all else—the subject-object realm—is seen as unreal; hence, no attraction or drag can remain. In the absence of this, merely calling God 'mere pyare; my Beloved' will only bring other kind of reactions. The ego might be forgotten for the time being, but it would continue to exist and will manifest from time to time. But in real love based on transcendental knowledge, forgetfulness of the world and the self culminates in transcendence of the subject-object duality; there is realization of one's identity with the absolute Reality. This is *brahmajñāna*, the knowledge of Brahman. Real bhakti is nothing but mukti. Imperfection is the other name of duality, of differentiation. When one attains true bhakti, the whole personality is changed and *trpti*, contentment, comes. Transcendence does not mean avoidance. Hence there is no place for inaction in this state. Absolute perfection results automatically from bhakti. *(To be continued)*

Light on Patanjali – I

Swami Sarvagatananda

Consciousness and the Unconscious

WHAT is meant by Consciousness? What is its true meaning? Consciousness is just like light. In all of us there is that pure Light, pure Consciousness. It is passing through my whole being, my ego, my mind, my senses. If something bites me, immediately I am conscious of it. Consciousness pervades just like light. When there is light, I can see every nook and corner, all things are visible because light is there. Because Consciousness is there, all-pervasive, I cognize things, I feel. Consciousness is behind my whole being. Truly speaking, that is me. My true nature and your true nature are pure Consciousness, nothing else. All other things are superimposed on this Consciousness, dancing before this Consciousness. My body, my mind are dancing before my Consciousness. I am Consciousness, and they are dancing before me. I identify with them—they are mine.

Really speaking, they are not mine, my true nature is pure Consciousness, as it is for all of you. That is why Shankaracharya writes in his poem 'The Six Stanzas on Nirvana': 'I am not this body, I am not this mind, I am not the senses, I am the pure blissful Consciousness.' From childhood up until now, see how your body has changed, how your mind has changed; but in all these stages you have identified with this mind: 'I was that, I am this now.' What is it in all these which is common? Awareness, consciousness, that's all.

Even when I die that Consciousness remains, the

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body and mind fall off. Nothing happens, others cry, hundreds cry for me, I don't cry. Rather I wonder why they are crying for me. I feel quite happy. Because this body is unfit to live and to manifest this Consciousness, it falls off, that's all. Sri Krishna tells very beautifully in the Bhagavadgita: Just as your consciousness moves on through childhood, youth, and old age, so also, in giving up this body, nothing happens; what falls off is your body, your consciousness does not fall off. Consciousness cannot be destroyed.

The object of Consciousness changes but Consciousness remains; it can never be destroyed. Likewise, our consciousness never changed; the objects, the contents of consciousness changed. That is our experience.

Even while you sleep, there is consciousness; only you say, 'I was not conscious of this body, I did not know anything.' It is just like going to a dark room—'What is there?' I ask. 'There is nothing,' you say. You are there; there is nothing to see but you are there, your consciousness is there.

In a dark room, nothing can be seen, you can't see even your own body. When you declare: 'There is nothing here, I don't see anything,' one thing is not missing: Consciousness. Also in deep sleep consciousness was there, it was not conscious of anything. Consciousness is our true nature.

Raja yoga helps you to find out, to become aware of, to experience the state of that pure Consciousness. To experience that, the contents of consciousness must be resolved, silenced. To put it in Buddha's language: 'Make this mind no mind.' When the vacillation of the mind is removed, Consciousness flows freely and completely in that pure mind.

Now, in our day to day life, what is happening?

Only a small part of the mind is conscious. The major part is unknown, unconscious—it has not come to the conscious level.

Just as with an iceberg—you see only the tip, most of the iceberg is under water; likewise, the conscious mind, the part of the mental content which is brought to your awareness, is only a very little part, much is there in the storehouse. What happens now in your day-to-day life, as Freud discovered, is that the unconscious guides you and the conscious makes you live. You live by the conscious mind but the unconscious forces you, drives you, guides you. That is the natural course of events—the contents that are not known to you force you, and you are helpless—but you take it for granted that you are guided by the conscious mind. Freud said that you are helpless because the unconscious guides you without your knowing it, you know the effect but not the cause, therefore you suffer. Patanjali said: 'No, sir! You need not suffer.'

Who put these thoughts into the unconscious? You did. At one time in your life you brought them in. Through the conscious you put them into the unconscious. Now there is a fight between the unconscious mind and the conscious mind. The war between these two is going on in your life now.

When you are lost, when you are disturbed, you don't know what is happening. A little thing can disturb you, a little prejudice, likes and dislikes, loves and hates, they disturb your mind and you are gone. Why? You are helpless there. But you never asked this question: 'Who put them there?' If you put them there at one time in your life, you must have the right to silence them. How? Patanjali says: 'You are not helpless, you are the master.' You put them there at one time. Now have the guts to say that you don't want them. 'When I was a child I played with all these dolls and toys; now I don't want to play.'

If you accept Freud's theory, you have to deny evolution. If you accept the theory of evolution, you have the right to say to your contents: 'Stop, I want to remain in my own way.' That is, have the guts to tell your own thoughts: 'Stop, I'm not going to pay any attention to you; I'm going to make a

new life, a new pattern; I am going to consciously create a new psyche.'

What do you have to do? Keep your mind alert, awake, mindful. That is why Buddha used to say: 'Whatever you do, be mindful, be alert, be awake.' Let nothing happen to your mind unconsciously, look at the thoughts coming. That is, you have to take full responsibility for your life; you are responsible for making or marring your life. This, many times, you don't do; you look here, look there, and just ignore the situation.

Really speaking, you need not look anywhere, just look within. But we have not the guts, the courage, the will to look within and ask the devil to stop. We must have that courage. Raja yoga tells you: 'Be strong, be courageous, have the ability to say "no" to your negative thoughts. Look at them squarely when they come up to the surface consciousness.' That is, be fully aware what is going on in your mind, fully conscious.

There is nothing in your mind that happens without your knowledge, but you don't catch it as you don't hold the mind. Without knowing this art of holding the mind you still can be a great scientist, great surgeon, great poet, great philosopher—as these are [achievements] of a different type altogether. Turn the mind in, look within, not out.

It is easy to look out, easy to analyse things outside, but you cannot easily analyse things inside, what is happening in your mind. A yogi is one who controls his mind, analyses his mind, examines his mind. Every thought, every impulse, every urge, every modification, he examines thoroughly. This is a definite process.

A time comes when you become aware of all your thoughts, tendencies, urges, and modifications. You stand up and say: 'All the devils are in me—and all the gods are also in me. Really speaking I am the sum total of all the things in the world, good and bad.'

The Atman and Yoga

The Atman is in all of us; it is behind the mind-stuff, behind the ego. The ego identifies with the mind—

stuff, with whatever there is: 'I am this, I am that.' When you silence the mind-stuff, the ego becomes flat—then, what are you going to identify with?

Jesus said that you must be like a child to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Children have no ego. Children move according to their whims, there is nothing definite about them—now this, the next moment that. As they grow they develop an ego; otherwise, in the early stages there is nothing. We become like that in the end. As children, out of ignorance, we don't identify [with objects]; then, out of wisdom, experience, [again] we don't identify. We have to reach a state of non-identification, we have to obtain detachment. This is called yoga.

'Yoga is the control of the urges that arise out of the mind-stuff.' If you control them, everything is perfect. The entire raja yoga is based on the control of all [instinctual] tendencies.

The mind-stuff must be free of all desires—if even a little is left, it blocks the passage of the real Self through the mind to illumine the entire being. Just as a small patch of cloud can hide the sun from us, can keep us in darkness, so also the mind can block the Self.

The mind may also be compared to a pin-hole camera—a small sand particle can block its aperture, preventing the image from passing through. Likewise, so fine is the mind that it can be blocked.

There should be nothing obstructing, the mind must be absolutely pure. That is why Jesus said: 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.'

When consciousness is absolutely pure, in that pure consciousness you get the pure Light. You identify yourself fully, 'I am the embodiment of that loving Consciousness.' That comes only when you purify the mind.

In raja yoga, the method is from the point of the mind: cognition. In other yogas there are other disciplines; but the purpose is the same—to purify the mind—because we are all beings [capable] of thinking, feeling, willing, restraining.

Patanjali uses the restraining method in raja yoga. In bhakti yoga feeling is the method, you magnify it and develop a kind of devotion; through

the path of devotion you purify yourself.

In jnana yoga, through philosophical thinking, you try to understand what is real, what is unreal, what is permanent, what is impermanent, what is the truth. You think and you act according to that. Whatever is not true you renounce, you discard. You develop a strong will, you renounce. Renunciation, detachment, is common to all the disciplines. You have to renounce, you have to be detached. In karma yoga it is the same thing. You must be detached from yourself and be concerned with others; selfless activity, dedicated action is karma yoga.

Philosophically, devotionally, practically, or psychically, you have to neutralize the tendencies, silence them. That is why Patanjali states at the very beginning: 'Yoga is the restraining of the mind stuff from taking various forms (*vruttis*, modifications, urges).' That is why you have to be always careful of what you think, of what you cognize.

You have to be very careful about everything that you see, everything that you experience; you have to be always alert, awake, because when you start cleaning from one side, if from the other side things are getting in, then you are gone. If from this door things are coming in while from that door you are emptying them, it is a perpetual process.

Therefore, in raja yoga there are two struggles—not only with that which comes from outside but also with that which comes from inside. One has to lead a very steady, self-controlled life, not allowing fresh things to come in. First there is control of the external, and then starts the control of the internal.

Freedom from Thoughts

Question: Swami, you said that for a man of realization thoughts exist but that he is not affected by those thoughts. But isn't purity of mind freedom from thoughts?

Answer: Not freedom from thoughts, it means freedom from disturbance. You cannot destroy thoughts. In the Gita it is clearly mentioned: 'Even though a man abstains from external contact, thoughts remain. But when he realizes the Supreme, they become completely silent.'

You cannot destroy thoughts. That is why even great souls could say after realization: 'I was like that, I went through all these things, I suffered, I was tempted, I struggled.'

Why could they remember everything that happened? Because the thoughts were still there. What they went through was also there—embedded experiences. You cannot destroy any experience. All are there, but the great souls are fully aware of them.

Even St Augustine, when he confessed what he did, remembered what he was, what he thought. Nothing is lost. But at that moment there is no disturbance at all. They [the thoughts] remain even in the man of illumination, but they are not obstacles.

Shankaracharya uses a beautiful simile: 'Suppose there is a rope lying [on the floor]; when it is completely burnt it still looks like a rope, for all appearances. When you try to pick it up, only ashes come out, it has not the power to bind, it looks like a rope, that's all.' Similarly, the impressions are there, absolutely helpless; they can't bind you, they don't disturb you.

Apparently they are all there, [but] they have lost their power because of non-identification. The moment you identify, all problems come. A man of realization identifies not with the impressions but with the Ground. Therefore these impressions will not bind [such a person]. You can't destroy anything, you can't forget anything.

The more you evolve, the more thoroughly you remember them [your thoughts]. You remember everything because of an alert, keen mind. Your mindfulness is so strong that you remember every detail, but you will never be disturbed by it.

The Real Me

Question: Is there anything that is absolute Truth, or is truth only in those things that an individual sees as true in his experience?

Answer: 'Absolute Truth' is more a philosophical and spiritual expression. What is absolute Truth? I ask: 'What is that which is real in me, what is the truth in me?' Let us ask: 'Who am I, who am I truly?'

Truth is defined as that which remains the same at all times and under all circumstances. Examine: 'What is that in me which remains the same at all times and under all circumstances?' You will be surprised to know that there is nothing. My whole body, my whole mind is a constantly changing whirlpool, but there is something behind this whirlpool: Awareness, Consciousness. This Consciousness is always there. What is the real truth of my being? Consciousness, nothing else. If Consciousness is the truth of my being, what is the truth of your being? Consciousness. Then what is the absolute Truth? Only Consciousness. That is what Shankaracarya has proved in his commentaries. Our true nature is *chit*, Consciousness—loving Consciousness, peaceful Consciousness. That is the truth of our being, any being.

What I see as identification is all superimposed on me. This superimposition was not there before—the swami was not there when I was a baby, my knowledge and experience were not there then. As I grew, as I am growing, I picked up and am picking up many things, they are all in me now.

What is the truth of my being? The pure Consciousness, that's all, nothing else. That pure Consciousness is called *chit* in Vedanta, in Christianity it is called the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore Jesus said: 'My kingdom is not of this world.'

Any experience that you have in this world does not belong to this kingdom, it comes and goes. The Kingdom of Heaven is absolute. Likewise, what Buddha called the Light of Truth is also the same pure Consciousness. Buddha called it 'Light' as it illuminates, enlightens. The Light of Buddha, the Kingdom of Heaven in Christianity, and the Atman or Consciousness of Vedanta are not different things, they are the same. Therefore, what is absolute Truth? The pure Consciousness. Call it Divine Consciousness or Cosmic Consciousness, as Richard M Bucke (1837–1902) stated. That is the truth. What is absolute Truth? Cosmic Consciousness. This is inference, mind that. Absolute Truth is inferential, individual truth is experiential. I experience that Consciousness. (Continued on page 460)

Vithoba of Pandharpur

Dr Suruchi Pande



Vithoba temple, Pandharpur

WHENEVER I hear of *Panduranga Vitthala* my mind goes back to a village called Mohol which is near the holy city of Pandharpur. My father was the branch manager of the State Bank of India at Mohol. I had my primary education in this village. Whenever we had guests, a visit to Pandharpur was a must. Pandharpur is the abode of Sri Vitthala or Vithoba, who is believed to be the essence and synthesis of Vishnu and Krishna. My father was born on the auspicious day of Ashadhi Ekadashi. So my grandmother fondly named him Panduranga. I remember my father performing the *maha-puja* of Vitthala. I stood near him. The priest gave me small quantities of milk, curd, sugar, honey, and ghee to apply on the image of the deity as part of the *panchamrita snana* (sacred ritual bath). Being able to touch the deity gave me great joy. At present, this *panchamrita snana* by devotees is not allowed. The prohibition became necessary for protecting the stone image of Sri Vitthala.

Ashadhi Ekadashi is a day of great celebration and jubilation at Pandharpur, when the Varakaris—devotees of Vitthala who gather from all over Maharashtra, walking all the way from their

homes to Pandharpur—have the holy darshan of their beloved deity. I remember the massive influx of devotees, the enormously crowded streets, and the canvas tents for medical aid and vaccination. The road from Mohol to Pandharpur is lined with neem trees casting their reticulated shadows on the ground. I can still hear the soft rustle of delicate green leaves, smell their medicinal aroma, and see the yellow seeds profusely scattered under the trees. Pandharpur makes me nostalgic. The roads leading to the main temple of Vitthala was paved with cobblestones. Outside the temple were small shops selling thick garlands of tulsi leaves, *kumkum*, *abir*, *bukka*—used for the auspicious marks on the forehead, and sweetmeat—*peda*, sugar candy, and the like. The air would be thick with the fragrance of tulsi. Even today devotees find the whole atmosphere charged with devotion, vibrant with bhajans and kirtans, reverberating with the melodious beats of *dhol*, *pakhawaj*, *mridanga*, *tal*, and *chiplyा*—drums and cymbals.

Pandharpur is full of temples. One of my favourites is the temple of Takpitya Vithoba (Vithoba who drinks buttermilk). Legend relates this deity

to a simple woman devotee of yore. If for some reason she could not go to the main temple for darshan, she would offer a mixture of buttermilk (*tak*) and ground *labi* (parched jowar, wheat, or paddy) as the *naivedya* (food offering) to Vitthala at her own home. And the deity, attracted by her ardent and pure devotion, would come to her house and relish the food. The shrine of Takpitya Vithoba was built by a brahmana widow named Radhabai in 1540 CE.¹ We can still get to see the stone bowl that the devotee used for offering food.

The Math of Kaikadi Maharaj is a great attraction for children at Pandharpur. It has lots of brightly coloured images and paintings of various mythical scenes based on Puranic descriptions. The pictures depicting the punishments supposed to be meted out to people in hell for their past wrongs are awe-inspiring and leave indelible impressions on the minds of children.

As I grew up, I developed a keen interest in the cultural, social, and historical aspects of the Vitthala cult. I was fascinated by the enormous numbers of Varkaris, hearts full of love, trekking speedily to see their very own *vithai mauli* (Mother Vithoba), putting up cheerfully with all the difficulties and inconveniences of a long journey. When we read Sant Jnaneshwar's *virahinis* (philosophical poems dealing with the pangs of separation from God) or Sant Tukaram's *abhangas* (a particular metrical composition in praise of the deity), we can feel the fervour and intense longing for the Supreme Presence. Jnaneshwar says, 'pailatoge kau kokatahe, shakun ge maye sangatahe; the crow is calling on the other side, predicting some auspicious happening.' He wishes to adorn the feet of this crow with gold, for it is telling that 'Pandharirau (that is, Vitthala) would be coming home as a guest'. Tukaram says, 'bhetilage jiva lagalise asa; the jiva is longing to meet you, O Lord.' A remarkable intensity of emotion and agony—generated by the separation from Vitthala—is expressed through these simple but penetrating words. What, in reality, is the nature of Vitthala? For saints he is the *rajasa* and *sukumara*, handsome and youthful, giving rise to spiritual rest-



Main entrance to Vithoba temple (Mahadwara)

lessness and passion in the very depths of the hearts of numerous devotees.

Maharashtra has a unique tradition of bhajan. How can one forget the impact of the forceful melody of Pandit Bhimsen Joshi's *abhangavani* or of the *abhangas* sung by Lata Mangeshkar?

Pandharpur: The Holy City²

The principle deity of Pandharpur is Sri Vitthala. The chief priests are from the Badve family. The front portion of the temple of Vitthala is known as *gad*, fortress. The temple has three doors each on its eastern and northern sides, and a door each on the south and west. The main door on the eastern side is the one frequently used, so it is called the Mahadwara. It is also called Namdev Darwaja, Namdev's door. Near the Mahadwara, there is the samadhi-pitha (memorial) of the saint Chokhoba. We have to climb twelve steps to reach it. The first of these steps is known as Namdevchi Payari (Namdev's step). Sant Namdev left his mortal coil at this very place. A brass image of his face is installed here. Namdev firmly believed that if he were to receive the touch of the ardent devotees of Vitthala, he would certainly be liberated. This step is sacred to the devotees. They take care not to step on it.

Namdevchi Payari



CHAITANYA DEGLURKAR



Hatti Darwaja

As we move on, we come to the *mandap* (porch) that serves as the *nagar-khana*, room for the drums and other instruments of the temple band. Next we enter the *chowk*, the temple courtyard. The *chowk* is lined with several *owaris*, rooms meant for accommodating pilgrims and resident devotees. The *owaris* have been framed in wood by the Badve family. The samadhi-pithas of Sadhu Prahladabua Badve and Kanhaya Haridas can be seen here. To the west of the *mandap* are two *dipamalas*—stone pillars for lamps lit on festive occasions. The wooden *mandap* also has a small shrine each to Garuda and Maruti Hanuman. The Hanuman image was installed by Samarth Ramdas.

Solakhambi Mandap



Garuda-kamb



Next we pass the images of Jaya and Vijaya—deities who protect the temple—and reach the Solakhambi Mandap (sixteen-pillared hall). Scenes from the Krishna-lila, images of Matsya, Kurma, and other avatars, and decorative floral designs are carved on these pillars. According to researchers this *mandap* was constructed in the Muslim era. The Garuda-kamb, covered with gold and silver plates, is the important pillar here. Garuda is the vehicle of Bhagavan Vishnu. He is a great devotee. So the devotees embrace this pillar lovingly and then move onwards for darshan of Vitthala. The entrance to the shrine is to the west, through the door known as Rupyacha Darwaja (the silver door). On crossing this door we reach the Chowkhambi Mandap (the four-pillared porch). The Hatti Darwaja (elephant door) with carved elephants on both sides is to the south. The image of Vithoba (see page 448) is three and a half feet tall and bears a *shivalinga* on the head. Around his neck, Vitthala has the *kaustubha-mani* (a precious gem that was obtained during the mythical churning of the ocean) and his breast is adorned with the footmark of his devotee, known as *vatsalanchhana*. The backdrop of the image is formed by a *prabhaval*, a decorative silver plate.

If we approach the Vitthala shrine from the southern door, we get to see the image of the saint woman Kanhopatra in a niche on the wall. Behind the Vitthala shrine, to the northwest, is the shrine to Rukmini, the consort of Vitthala. The shrines

to Satyabhama and Rahi are also close by.

That Rakhumai (the popular name of Rukmini) and Vithoba have separate shrines is a unique feature of this temple. There is a story among the Dhangars—who have traditionally been shepherds, herdsmen, and wool weavers—regarding this permanent parting. The story goes like this: Vithoba's wife actually had the name Padmavati and she was fondly called Padubai. She always had to remain busy with her household chores. Once she was extremely tired and so refused to serve Maliraya, a guest of her husband. Vithoba turned furious and pronounced a curse that she would go mad and be separated from him. Vithoba's curse came true. Padubai went to the forest and died under a tamarind tree. Her parents Janakoji and Kamalaja ran to see her when they heard of this sad turn of events. But Vithoba assumed the form of a snake and sat blocking the way. He would not allow anyone to go near Padubai's corpse, even as kites and vultures ate it up. He then had clouds pour showers and wash Padubai's bones to the sea. This tragedy badly upset Maliraya as he felt he had caused it. So he undertook penance by the seashore for the next twelve years. The sea was pleased with his tapas and Maliraya requested the sea to return Padubai's bones. He then reverentially immersed these bones in Padmatirtha, a lake by the Chandrabhaga River, and a beautiful lotus emerged from its waters. Meanwhile, Vithoba was tormented by the separation from Padubai. He was wandering restlessly in search of Padubai when he reached the shores of Padmatirtha and saw the beautiful lotus. He plucked it, and lo! Padubai appeared before him bearing the name Rukmini. But Vithoba had by now got over his attachment for samsara. He said, 'My words cannot be untrue. Our household life has come to an end. We shall not be



Rukhumai

staying under one roof. But we shall meet everyday, communicate with each other, and dedicate our lives to the welfare of our devotees.' This is how their shrines got separated.

This story has a symbolic meaning. Vithoba is the symbol of non-attachment; he is portrayed as the conqueror of *kamini* and *kanchana*. Together, Vithoba and Rukmini represent humans with divine qualities. So they ac-

cepted their suffering and a life of duty, devotion, forgiveness, and truth. They decided to live for the sake of their devotees.

Satyabhama is the wife of Krishna and Radha is his dear friend. Rahi is Radha. In the stories and legends of Maharashtra, Rahi is the wife of Vitthala.

Besides these main temples there are the images of Kashi Vishwanatha, Rama-Lakshmana, Kalabhairava, Rameshwara Shiva, Dattatreya, and Narasoba in six different rooms. A seventh room lies vacant. These rooms were built by Kanbawa Badve. There is a narrow walk between these rooms and the Solakhambi Mandap. At the eastern end of this walk, there is a piece of inscription known as Chauryanshicha Shilalekh (the stone inscription of eighty-four).

There are numerous other temples at Pandharpur. These include the temples to: Takpitya Vithoba, Pundalika, Vishnupada-Venunada, Gopalakrishna of Gopalpur, and Muralidhara; Gondavalekar Rama; Mallikarjuna, Bhuleshwara, Tryambakeshwara, Koteshwara, Vateshwara, and Amriteshwara; Nagareshwara Sarkarvada Mahadeva, Bhadalyacha Mahadeva, Garecha Mahadeva, and Bericha Mahadeva; Ganapati, Shakambhari, Chandrabhaga, and Paravaril Datta; Panchamukhi Maruti, Tambada Maruti, and Kala Maruti; Khajivale Murti; Padmavati, Vyasa, Ambabai, Lakhubai, Yamai and Jyotiba, and Namdev. There is also

the samadhi-pitha of Sridhara Swami and Mahaprabhuchi Baithak (Mahaprabhu's parlour).

Vithoba's Image

Researchers hold varying opinions about the history of the Vitthala temple and image. The main temple was built by the Yadavas of Devagiri in the twelfth century, though the deity was well-known several centuries earlier. During the Muslim invasion in the sixteenth century, the image had to be kept hidden for fear of desecration.

There is another interesting debate about

Vitthala. There are arguments suggesting that Vitthala is a Karnataki or Kannada deity rather than a Marathi deity. Jnaneshwar says: '*kanada ho vitthalu karnataku, yene maja lavile vedhi*'; this Vitthala who is *kanada* (difficult to understand) and *karnataku* (from Karnataka, or *kara nataku*, playful) has put me in the state of constant remembrance.' Saints like Eknath and Namdev have also referred to him as *kanada vitthala*. Those who vouch for his being Marathi emphasize that *kanada* means 'inaccessible, indescribable'.³

Geographically, Pandharpur is on the border of Maharashtra and Karnataka. The ancient name of Pandharpur was Pandarage. So the Karnataki shades of Pandurang Vitthala cannot be easily wiped out. In fact, a closer look at the history of Pandharpur reveals that Vitthala has also had Buddhist and Jain aspects.

To the saints, there is no point in such regionalism. All of them bear a tender affection and innocent love for Vitthala. For them, Vitthala is '*savale*



Vithoba of Pandharpur

parabrahma; Para-brahman with a dark complexion'; he is Hari in the form of a *gopa* (cowherd); he is also Shiva and Vishnu. There are many Kannada saints and poets who have sung the glory of Vitthala with loving devotion. In his poem 'Pandurangamahatmyamu', the Telugu poet Tenali Ramakrishna too sings praises to Vitthala:

Pundarikundu kshetrapalundu golichi yunda navyaktamukhya samyuktundaguchu pandurangandu bhakta kalpadrulila nishthaphalasiddhi dora-battinchu ninti

(O Parvati), accepting the services of Pundarika and Kshetrapala (Kala-bhairava), becoming the wish fulfilling tree by assuming a subtle body for the sake of devotees, fulfilling their wishes, the deity Panduranga resides in that temple.

This shows that Vitthala is an impressive symbol of synthesis. He became the centre for the emergence of a unique social and spiritual movement. The devotee saints declared war against hollow rituals and hypocrisy. They were not interested in the shallow vulgar show of erudition. On the contrary they wanted to experience the spirit of the 'one without a second' in their own life. Why do we need temples? Because temples and deities represent humbleness which, along with goodness and the spirit of synthesis, we need to protect. If this purpose is not served, then sacred places and temples are mere heaps of stone. Tukaram says: '*tirthi dhondapani, deva rokada sajjani*; holy places are made of mere stones, God is in wisdom and in the pious'.

Vithoba, Vitthala, Panduranga

The Varkaris fondly address Vitthala as Vithoba Mauli (Mother Vithoba). According to legend he is related to both Shiva and Vishnu. Panduranga is another of his popular names. Scholars have provided interesting insights into the etymological meanings of these names.⁴

If the image of Vitthala is black, why is he called Panduranga (white coloured)? R C Dhere has pointed out that though the *Skanda Purana* mentions 'Panduranga' as a synonym for 'Vitthala', it is actually the name of the holy site of Vitthala's shrine. Just as 'Kashi Vishwanatha' means 'Vishwanatha of Kashi', 'Panduranga Vitthala' means 'Vitthala of Panduranga'.⁵ According to the *Deshinamamala* of Hemachandra (c. 11th cent. CE) the deity is Pandarango Ruddammi and is related to Rudra-Shiva. A copper plate dated 516 CE records the grant of five villages (or towns) to the brahmana Jayadvittha by the Rashtrakuta king Avidheya. One of these five villages is Pandarangapalli. Similarly, there is the Sanskrit-Kannada inscription (1236 CE) carved on a beam in the Solakhambi Mandap of the main temple of Vitthala where Pandharpur is referred to as Panduranga.

In a copper plate found at Bendigere near Belgaum, Pandharpur is referred to as Paundarika Kshetra and Vitthala is described as Vishnu. Elsewhere, Pandharpur is called Phagnipur. In the *Inaneshwari*, King Ramadevarai Yadava is described as 'pandhari-phada-mukhya'. *Pandhari* refers to the tutelary village god and *phada* is a place of public business. So Ramadevarai was the chief of the business centre Pandharpur.

Several etymological derivations have been suggested for the term *vitthala*. The deity stood and waited on a brick (*vit* in Marathi) thrown by his great devotee Pundarika; so he is Vitthala. *Vishatara* means a *darbhasana* (a grass seat) and *vishatala* a remote place. So one who lives in such a place is Vitthala (the letters *ra* and *la* are often exchanged in Prakrit languages).

Tukaram says, 'vicha kela thoba, mbanoni nav to vithoba; the learned say that Vitthala is one who is



Inside Vithoba's temple: The hall for bhajans

gracious towards innocent people devoid of knowledge.' A more esoteric explanation is as follows: *vit* means knowledge, and *tha* means *shunya* (void); so *vittha* signifies ignorance and the suffix *la* 'one who accepts'. So Vitthala is the one who protects ignorant jivas. Or, as he is all-pervasive, resides in *akash* or *vijat-sthala* (space), and is absorbed into *akash*, he is Vitthala.

In contrast to the above explanations, there is a general agreement among linguists that the word *vitthala* is related to the Prakrit for Vishnu, *vittha* (*vishnu* → *vishtu* → *bitthu* → *vitthulu* → *vitthalu* → *vitthala*). Rakhumai is Vitthala's spiritual consort. This name is derived from Lakshmi (*lakshmi* → *lakshma* → *lakhama* → *rakhama* → *rakhuma*). If Vishnu is Vitthala, his spouse must be Lakshmi or Rakhumai.

But to the simple-hearted Varkari devotees, these analytical details are not of much interest. To them Vitthala is their mother, Vithoba Mauli.

(To be continued)

References

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2. The descriptions in this section are largely based on *Sri Vitthala ani Pandharpur*.
3. R C Dhere, *Sri Vitthala: Ek Mahasamanvaya* (Pune: Srividya, 1984), 53.
4. Much of the etymological information that follows is from P R Behere, *Vithobache Rajya* (Mumbai: Karnatak Prakashan, 1964), 72–6.
5. *Sri Vitthala: Ek Mahasamanvaya*, 43.

Hinduism and Christianity: A Fine Balance

Ian Lawton

IN Jerusalem, a journalist heard about a very old Jewish man who had been going to the Wailing Wall to pray, twice a day, every day, for many years. She went to the Wailing Wall to meet him. She watched him pray and, after about forty-five minutes, when he turned to leave, she approached him for an interview.

‘Sir, how long have you been coming to the Wall and praying?’

‘For about sixty years.’

‘Sixty years! That’s amazing! What do you pray for?’

‘I pray for peace between Christians, Jews, and Muslims. I pray for an end to religious hatred, and I pray that our children might grow up in safety and freedom.’

‘How do you feel after doing this for sixty years?’

‘Like I’m talking to a brick wall.’

Religious Differences in a Cosmic Perspective

There must be many Hindus who feel the same way. Hinduism is one of the most peaceful and tolerant of religions. However, after several invasions rocked the Indian subcontinent—from Alexander the Great’s raid to the Islamic conquests, and most recently British colonial rule—you could forgive Hindus for feeling that their message of peace is like speaking to a brick wall.

Religious divisions do so much harm in the world, and are so unnecessary. The world is racked by suffering and tragedy, and religion could offer so much meaning and purpose in the midst of the sadness. In the grand scheme of life and its trials, religious divisions count for nothing.

May the world come together and stop fighting over religious doctrine and dogma!

If calling yourself a Christian makes you a better person and improves the planet, then call yourself a Christian. But if calling yourself a Christian makes you feel that you are better than the vast proportion of the planet, then stop it. It is not doing you any good, and it is not doing the planet any good.

If calling yourself a Hindu makes you a better person, and makes the planet a more just place, then call yourself a Hindu. But if it makes you think that you are better than the vast majority of the planet, then stop it. It is not doing you any good, and it is not doing the planet any good.

Hinduism in a Changing World

I am fascinated by Hinduism, its synergy with Christianity, and its universal challenge to end hatred and foster religious unity. Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world. It also has the third largest number of followers, behind Christianity and Islam. There are about one billion Hindus around the world, and around two million in the United States. Hindu Americans make up one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. And this does not even include the estimated thirty-two million Americans who find some inspiration from Hindu spirituality through yoga and meditation practices.

Now, I am not suggesting that thirty-two million Americans understand the essence of Hindu teaching. I certainly do not. It is an ancient and profound philosophy that I have only scratched the surface of. But in my practice of yoga and meditation, I get some small insight into the richness and depth of this tradition.

There are about two billion Christians in the world, one and a half billion Muslims, and one billion Hindus. Somewhere between the Hindus and Muslims lies another group of people, and they are usually called secular or agnostic or non-religious. It is actually the third largest group of people in the world. The church alumni—those who find no relevance in the church but retain a sense of Christian tradition—form part of this group. The shrine alumni—those who do not practise formal Hinduism but retain a sense of Hindu tradition—form part of this group as well. Many of the thirty-two million Americans who practise some form of Hindu philosophy would also put themselves in that category.

This is worth noting because it means that a large proportion of the planet's inhabitants share a common interest in universal spirituality, with or without a particular religious tradition. I learn from Hinduism that there are as many names for God as there are tongues to speak them. There are as many paths to God as there are feet to walk them. Might that diversity include the path of rational inquiry and science, yoga and non-religion-specific meditation?

These are exciting times. It is important to note that Hindu Indian immigrants are among the more affluent and educated community in America. Sixty-five per cent have college degrees compared to a national average of twenty-five per cent. Amongst Hindu Americans, the average annual family income is seventy thousand dollars, compared to the national average of fifty thousand. Hindus are bringing to America significant contributions in technology, medicine, engineering, and fashion; and maybe most importantly, they are bringing a reminder of the essence of all religions—inner peace manifesting as outer and global peace.

Understanding the Hindu religion as well as the social impact of Hindu Americans is very important. Trade between India and the United States has been growing exponentially for years. Along with China, India and the US will form the three largest world economies within a decade. American

outsourcing of employment and research to India is a burgeoning industry. All in all, this is a significant, new, and emerging relationship. New partnerships are forming continually, including progressive religious partnerships across the world religions; not to mention the partnership with the shrine alumni, those who find inspiration in Hindu philosophies even without practising Hindu rituals, and those who practise yoga and meditation.

Hinduism and Christianity: Branches on the Vine

The synergy between Christianity and Hinduism might best be captured in the parable of the vine and the branches, a form of which appears both in the Bhagavadgita and in John's gospel, incidentally both in chapter fifteen. Both versions of the parable speak of interrelatedness with its weaving and twisting branches.

'It is said that there is the imperishable Ashwatta tree with its roots above and branches below, and of which the leaves are the Vedas. He who knows this is the knower of the Vedas.'¹

'I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me, and I in them, bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.'²

Consider these four symbolic connections:

One . It's all about *the vine*! On a full and healthy vine, you can only see the branches, but the branches are manifesting the *divinity* of the vine. This is a deeply mystical idea that I will return to. Hinduism and Christianity are concerned more with internal motivation than with external authority. Like a vine, growth comes from within, even if growth depends on external interactions also.

Two . It's all about branching out! As religions travel and change, new relationships change the nature of the religions.

Three . Pruning the dead wood! A key feature of growth on a vine is the pruning of dead branches. Hinduism and progressive Christianity have both pruned certain dogmatic and superstitious beliefs and practices over the centuries.

Four . *Uva uvam varia fit*; Latin saying that

means 'Grape, grape, seeing, change happens' or more neatly, 'Grapes ripen in the presence of other grapes' or maybe 'grapes in relationship become wine, become *divine*.' It is an essential teaching of all religions—you come to know yourself in relationship with others. Religions come to realize their true nature in relationship with other religions.

As a Christian leader, my intention is to branch out and get to know the vine as it manifests in Hinduism.

Hinduism and Scriptures

Hinduism has many texts that were passed down orally from generation to generation. Some of the texts include the Vedas, the Upanishads, the epics—such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana—the Puranas, the law books, and many other philosophical texts.

The key element of the Hindu approach to scriptures is that it is more concerned with realization than revelation. The aim is personal experience of truth, whether that truth comes through a living teacher or the words passed down through generations. This is in contrast to traditions that believe the words have been inspired directly by God and are authoritative for all time.

Imagine Christianity without such a deep attachment to the Bible as God's immutable and literal revelation. The Bible is wonderful, full of great wisdom, insight, and depth, but imagine Christianity without such strong attachment to the Bible. Imagine the dialogue that would be opened up. Imagine the peace that would blossom around the world if just that one change took place, if Christians just loosened their grip, lessened their attachment to the Bible as divine revelation from outside of nature into human life.

The problem with external divine revelation is this: how do you dialogue with it? How do you dialogue with someone who says 'God told me'?

Imagine if Christianity could prune the dead wood that is attachment to revelation, and learn to trust experience or realization. The irony is that once you loosen the attachment to Bible as divine

revelation, you can begin to play with the sacred text, learn from it, interact with it, read it symbolically, have a relationship with it. It comes alive in new ways.

How many religious wars have been predicated on competing scriptural revelation? A frightening number! Once you realize the universal truth of texts such as the Bible and the Hindu scriptures, peace is the only authentic expression.

Hinduism and Equality

How does the Hindu religion integrate its deep belief that the sacred is manifest in all things alongside the reality of systemic inequality? How does the Hindu religion integrate a belief in karma and self-responsibility?

The answer might best be captured in the Hindu story of the sage and the scorpion. A sage found a scorpion struggling for life in a puddle of water on the road. He stopped to pick it up and was promptly stung on the hand. He again tried to pick it up and was stung right away. He tried many times to save it but was stung every time he picked it up. A passer by who was watching what was happening asked the sage, 'Why do you try to help the scorpion when it is stinging you every time?' The sage replied, 'It is the nature of the scorpion to sting, and it is my nature to try and liberate it.'

The oppressive caste system seems to be an example of Hinduism pruning dead wood off the branches of the vine. Gandhi and many other Hindu leaders have fought against the inequality of the system. Fighting inequality has been their attempt to express their nature and liberate the oppressed, even if the system continues to bite them.

Whether it be the Hindu belief in karma, or the Christian belief in God's predetermined plan, there is great truth in the realization that the human task is to live one's greatest humanity and allow one's actions to become part of the karmic reality of cause and effect.

Hinduism and Spiritual Types

Hinduism is not only pluralistic in its affirmation

of all religious paths, it's also pluralistic in its understanding of human nature. Hinduism says that people are different and so are their personalities.

It says there are three broad types of people: thinkers, doers, and lovers. Correspondingly, there are three main paths to liberation: jnana yoga (the path of rational inquiry), karma yoga (the path of action), and bhakti yoga (the path of devotion). Raja yoga is also in the realm of devotion, but focuses on meditation and contemplation.

Another characteristic of Hinduism, which is also shared by Christianity, is skilful means; that is, there is more than one way to practise your spirituality. Know yourself and your style. Know what is your most effective means of developing your spirituality. Discover your own balance of practice as thinkers, doers, and lovers.

Hinduism and Enlightenment

Hinduism offers the tongue twister 'that thou art', or 'thou art that', as the ultimate goal of spirituality, however you practise and realize this enlightenment. It might be best explained with a story that I gleaned from Karen Armstrong's book *The Great Transformation*.

Indra was seeking enlightenment and spent about thirty years with Prajapati, the Supreme Deity. After thirty years, Prajapati told him to dress in his finest clothes and look at his reflection in a pan of water. He did so, and as he stood looking at his reflection he realized that he was Brahman, without fear or imperfection. He was thrilled with this enlightenment. The body is God. There is no need for sacrifice or meditation; simply seek the heart's desire and personal gain, and enlightenment will follow.

But as Indra travelled back to heaven with this new realization, another thought struck him. In time, this body would begin to fade and lose its beauty. So he returned to Prajapati and studied for a further seventy-odd years, still seeking the answer and going deeper into himself. This time, Prajapati told him that enlightenment was found in the dream state, when the self is free from pretence and

attachments. This seemed hopeful to Indra, and he celebrated enlightenment through his dream world. After a while, this too was squashed as he realized that his dreams were often full of suffering and sadness. This was not what he was looking for.

So he went back, and this time was told by Prajapati that it was in a deep, dreamless sleep that enlightenment would be found. Indra tried this, but it too was unsatisfactory as he felt he might as well have been dead at rest in this state. So one last time he returned to Prajapati for some years.

Finally Prajapati taught him that enlightenment lies beyond body and mind, in the deep awareness of one who has a body but is not that body, the one who dreams but is not those dreams, and the one who merges with the deep, dreamless sleep. The one who is aware is Brahman, God.

Even for the mighty Indra it took one hundred years of study to realize that it was the very process of self-discovery that was enlightenment. Spirituality is a process of self-awareness. It does not have an end.

Hinduism has taught for many centuries that all religions come from the same place, and all religions are heading to the same truths. They just have different ways of getting there, different stories, and different imagery.

If religions could get over the need to have the biggest branches, they might realize that it is all one vine, and all the branches are intermingled, mixed, and related to each other.

All Is God, All Is Brahman

In a passage from the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, the sage Uddalaka teaches his son about Brahman or Atman (God):

Father: 'Bring me a fig.'

Son: 'Here it is, Father.'

Father: 'Break it open. What do you see inside?'

Son: 'Some rather tiny seeds, Father.'

Father: 'Break one of them open. What do you see inside?'

Son: 'Nothing at all, Father.'

Father: 'From the inside of this tiny seed, which seems to be nothing at all, this whole fig tree grows. That is the Real. That is the Atman (the Spirit). That thou art, my son.'

'Now put some salt in this water and bring it to me in the morning.' [The son stirs salt into the water. The next morning, he brings the water to Uddalaka.]

Father: 'Fetch me the salt that you put there yesterday.'

Son: 'I cannot, Father. It is dissolved.'

Father: 'Then take a sip from the edge of it. What is there?'

Son: 'Salt.'

Father: 'Take a sip from the middle. What is there?'

Son: 'Salt.'

Father: 'Take a sip from the far edge. What is there?'

Son: 'Salt. It is always the same.'

Father: 'That which you cannot grasp, but can taste in every drop, that is the Real. That is Atman (the Spirit). That thou art, my son.'³

This is a profound truth, shared by Hinduism and Christianity. The spiritual journey is not one that you can grasp. You cannot map it out. It does not have some definite ending place. It is only something that you can experience in your own way. Like the salt in the water, you know it is there. Even though you cannot separate the salt from the water, you taste its saltiness.

The Bible speaks of the mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds, even a seed you cannot see, as a symbol for the spiritual life. Jesus said, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.'⁴

Even when you cannot see the sacred connections, they are there; the branches mix and mingle

I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

—St Peter, Acts, 10.34

with other branches—there lies the value of the interfaith journey.

This is the most exciting time in history. Spiritual paths can come together without fear or competition. We can learn from each other. We can take from those spiritual paths that resonate with our experience.

Hinduism as Progressive Inspiration

In some ways, Hinduism has less dead wood to prune than Christianity and Islam. It has acceptance and inclusion written into its DNA. It has warned against dogmatism and exclusive religious claims for centuries.

It is open to science, enjoying the realization that science arrives at many of the same truths that Hinduism has understood symbolically for centuries. The cyclical nature of life, impermanence, interchangeability of matter and energy, and such others facts are examples of Vedantic truths passed down through centuries.

Life is too short for religious bigotry. May Christianity catch some of the acceptance of Hinduism. May you catch the inspiration of Hinduism! May you realize the truth taught in all religions: that spirit is like a vine, thriving on relationship.

I end with some thoughts on the deep suffering of the world. Everybody knows what it is to endure suffering, sadness, and loss. You know how fragile life is. You know that it is not worth sweating the small stuff of religious difference in this great cosmic dance of which we are all a part.

Life is too short to be divided for the sake of doctrine or dogma. It is time to stop religious division and come together to celebrate the essence of spiritual paths, and the essence of religious traditions that are centuries old. That essence is the beauty of all things manifesting the vine!



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Albert Einstein: The Mystic

Swami Tathagatananda

The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I am a devoutly religious man.

—Albert Einstein¹

Gifts of Incalculable Magnitude

AMONG scientists, Albert Einstein was a rare soul of singular depth and sincerity, a straightforward personality. He was also a mystic with an enquiring intellect engaged in a lifelong, honest search for truth. He struggled untiringly for answers to questions about what he called 'a superior intelligence that reveals itself in the knowable world'.² These characteristics are gifts of incalculable magnitude. The sum of the attributes he brought to bear on his dedicated, unwavering search for truth as a scientist qualified him to probe the inner secrets of nature and to respect nature's revelations. His dedication to science and its mysteries was sustained by his deep spiritual conviction about the harmony of nature. It was not a mere sentiment for Einstein. He articulated the deep emotion that stirred his entire being: 'The scientist is possessed by a sense of universal causation. ... His religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection. ... It is beyond question closely akin to that which has possessed the religious gen-

iuses of all ages' (210). He was keenly aware that ideas did not appear in his mind out of nothing. 'Ideas come from God,' he said.³

Early Mystical Tendency

Einstein's 'instinctive sense of cosmic unity' was the essence that nourished his creative brilliance and imagination from an early age. One of the most celebrated stories about him suggests that his mystical reverence for nature's hidden powers was aroused when he was only four or five years old, lying ill in bed with his father's gift of the compass. To Einstein, the gift was more than a mere toy. His *Autobiographical Notes* vividly record the sense of wonder that overwhelmed him: here was a needle, isolated and unreachable, totally enclosed, and caught in the grip of an invisible urge, a force or energy that made it strive determinedly northward. The revelation of the magnetic needle upset his simplistic view of an orderly physical world and contradicted his thinking. He recalled this experience many times throughout his life. 'I can still remember ... that this experience made a deep and lasting impression on me. Something deeply hidden had to be behind things.'⁴ He was already familiar with pendulums and falling objects. He could not, however, realize at the time that they too presented a mystery awaiting his great contribution to our understanding of gravitation. Nonetheless, his curiosity, intuition, and imagination were aroused. 'I have no special gift—I am only passionately curious,' he would say. His lifelong devotion to a unified field theory began with this experience of the compass (*ibid.*).

Einstein's native constitution was meditative. His childlike awe of the 'extra-personal world' that he found in science never left him. It sustained him for the rest of his life. One biographer has written:

'The boy who had found neither security nor freedom in human relationships, and whose attempt to find them in religion had failed, would seek them now in science. Yet one is struck by Einstein's emphasis on the sympathy he felt with those he thought like-minded. "Similarly motivated men of the present and past," he went on, were "the friends which could not be lost."⁵

His *Autobiographical Notes* record his mood at that time: 'Out yonder there was this huge world, which exists independently of us human beings and which stands before us like a great, eternal riddle, at least partly accessible to our inspection and thinking. The contemplation of this world beckoned like a liberation, and I soon noticed that many a man whom I had learned to esteem and to admire had found inner freedom and security in devoted occupation with it' (*ibid.*).

A long time would pass before he could master the art of concentrated reflection on the physical laws of the universe. He wrote to a Nobel Prize-winning friend:

When I ask myself why it should have been me, rather than anyone else, who discovered the relativity theory, I think that this was due to the following circumstance: An adult does not reflect on the space-time problems. Anything that needs reflection of this matter he believes he did in his early childhood. I, on the other hand, developed so slowly that I only began to reflect about space and time when I was a grown-up. Naturally I then penetrated more deeply into these problems than an ordinary child would.⁶

A Religious Temperament

Life was full of significance for him. The mystic in him saw that the entire scope of creation is rooted in profound mystery. The more deeply he pondered over the structure and nature of the universe, the more he was confronted by the colossal, all-pervading intelligence popularly called 'God.' When someone asked him if Christ existed historically, Einstein answered immediately, 'Unquestionably! No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates

in every word. No myth is filled with such life.'⁷

If one is to know the great meaning of life, one has to be religious, or spiritually inclined. Einstein was the only eminent scientist to use the word 'God' frequently and to articulate his ideas of cosmic religious consciousness in an undivided voice. His colleagues did not refer to God while discussing the harmony apparent in nature. To Einstein, God was a metaphor for the transcendent Unity. Though he was vocal about his concept of God, many people thought he was an atheist, since his God was not a theological God. Einstein's vision of unity was apparent to him in an impersonal God whose power pervades the entire cosmos, a God that can be seen in the laws governing the universe.

'The true value of a human being,' he wrote, 'is determined primarily by how he has attained liberation from the self.'⁸ This inner spiritual evolution after controlling the lower nature and this estimation of human worth based on the expansion of spiritual consciousness are the ideals of mystics. Einstein wrote, 'We have to go beyond the "rabble of the senses" to discover the deep underlying unity behind the world of multiplicity which has been purchased at the price of emptiness of content.' He expressed this idea again in 1936 in an essay, 'Physics and Reality', a written defence of realism during the quantum mechanics debates: 'The very fact that the totality of our sense experiences is such that, by means of thinking, it can be put in order, this fact is one that leaves us in awe. The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility. ... The fact that it is comprehensible is a miracle.'⁹

The more deeply he probed into the structure and nature of the universe, the more he faced a colossal and all-pervading intelligence, which he instinctively thought of as mysterious. In 1929, when his important paper on the unified field theory was published and thousands of copies were sold in Europe and America, Einstein was interviewed by many journalists. He said to a British reporter:

It has been my greatest ambition to resolve the duality of natural laws into unity. The purpose of my work is to further this simplification, and particu-

larly to reduce to one formula the explanation of the gravitational and electromagnetic fields. For this reason I call it a contribution to a 'unified field theory' ... Now, but only now, we know that the force that moves electrons in their ellipses about the nuclei of atoms is the same force that moves our earth in its annual course around the sun (342).

These remarks demonstrate his deep conviction of the unity or noumenon that lies behind all phenomena in the universe, as well as his desire to prove this to himself and to the world once and for all. His scientific observation of an underlying, eternal reality behind the phenomenal world became an inner religious conviction. When Solovine disapproved of his suggestion that there is something 'religious' in material science, Einstein wrote to him, 'I have no better expression than "religious" for this confidence in the rational nature of reality and in its being accessible, to some degree, to human reason. When this feeling is missing, science degenerates into mindless empiricism' (462–3). There was always a place for non-rational wonder in science for him. He once wrote that 'the sense of "wonder" ... increases ever more with the development of our knowledge'.¹⁰ Einstein did not respect the positivists and atheists who disagreed and whose respective philosophies attempted to make the universe 'God-free and even wonder-free'. His conception of religion was rooted in a cosmic outlook.

'What I Believe'

In the summer of 1930 Einstein was in Caputh, his beautiful retreat near Potsdam, southwest of Berlin. Relaxing in the privacy of his room or sailing on the Havel lakes, he composed his famous credo 'What I Believe' (a quote from which begins this article). Einstein further wrote: 'It is enough for me to contemplate the mystery of conscious life perpetuating itself through all eternity, to reflect upon the marvellous structure of the universe which we can dimly perceive, and to try humbly to comprehend even an infinitesimal part of the intelligence manifested in nature'.¹¹

Einstein wrote 'What I Believe' in 1930, when it

was spoken onto a record at the request of the German League for Human Rights. Subsequently, it was translated variously for several publications with the title 'The World as I See It'.¹² In this text, Einstein describes himself as a 'lone traveler' who is nevertheless aware of his obligation to society:

My passionate sense of social justice and social responsibility has always contrasted oddly with my pronounced lack of need for direct contact with other human beings and human communities. I am truly a 'lone traveler' and have never belonged to my country, my home, my friends, or even my immediate family, with my whole heart; in the face of all these ties, I have never lost a sense of distance and a need for solitude—feelings that increase with the years.¹³

His mind rose in solitude to spiritual heights for the permanent treasure that validated his steadfast and peaceful inner nature. Certain ideals inspired him to live a cosmocentric life: 'I have never looked upon ease and happiness as ends in themselves—such an ethical basis I call the ideal of a pigsty. ... The ideals which have guided my way, and time after time have given me the energy to face life, have been Kindness, Beauty and Truth'.¹⁴

These ideals, shared by the mystics, are based on an inner spiritual evolution after the lower nature is controlled. Expanded spiritual consciousness reveals the value of human birth. To enjoy the deep meditation Einstein describes in his credo one has to be absolutely free from egotism.

Einstein and Spinoza

Einstein was a self-proclaimed disciple of Spinoza (1632–77), the seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher and mystic. Like Spinoza, he found his highest thoughts and sense of purpose in seclusion. He wrote, 'I am fascinated by Spinoza's pantheism, but I admire even more his contribution to modern thought because he is the first philosopher to deal with the soul and body as one, and not two separate things'.¹⁵ Aloof from those lower values that grip the masses, Einstein and Spinoza shared a strong conviction in the existence of an impersonal Supreme

Being. They both felt humility, reverence, and awe before that Being's divine power manifest in nature.

Spinoza preferred obscurity, simplicity, and independence to being in the limelight as a professor of philosophy at Heidelberg University. He led a frugal existence as a lens grinder and died at the age of forty-five from pulmonary tuberculosis. His will power, steadfast idealism, and dedication made a deep and enduring impact on Einstein. Einstein pointed to Spinoza's philosophy to explain his own: 'My views are near those of Spinoza: admiration for the beauty of and belief in the logical simplicity of the order and harmony which we can grasp humbly and only imperfectly. I believe that we have to content ourselves with our imperfect knowledge and understanding and treat values and moral obligations as a purely human problem—the most important of all human problems.'¹⁶

Einstein further said, 'I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the lawful harmony of all that exists, but not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and the doings of mankind.'¹⁷

'God Does Not Play Dice with the World'

Einstein was well aware of the unity behind diversity and the liberating power of that conviction. He wrote:

A human being is part of the whole called by us 'the universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical illusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free us from this prison by widening our circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.¹⁸

'Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security,' he wrote.

His legendary phrase, 'God does not play dice with the world', reflects Einstein's sincere humility,

a quality he shared with Newton, who expressed it in this way: 'I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself now and then, finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than [the] ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.'¹⁹

Einstein's cosmic consciousness definitely goes beyond creeds and dogma. Cosmic consciousness is the pure essence of religion; it avoids the common anthropomorphic concept of God and cannot be reduced to a theological system. He did not believe in a personal God of rewards and punishments with a will analogous to our own. He had a very strong conviction about the existence of a principle or order that manifests itself in the world of matter and in the mind: 'The great scientists of all centuries of our civilization have paid tribute, in some measure, to the power and principle back [*sic*] of the universe—the titanic First Cause which still mothers creation.'²⁰ He professed to be a deeply religious person driven by this conviction of a unifying higher principle.

'Do Scientists Pray?'

During one of his visits to New York, a six-year-old girl asked him, 'Do scientists pray?' He at once understood the simplicity and profundity of her question and her need for a truthful answer. He also trusted that she could grasp his equally profound twofold reply:

Scientific research is based on the idea that everything that takes place is determined by laws of nature, and this holds for the actions of people. For this reason, a scientist will hardly be inclined to believe that events could be influenced by prayer, in other words, by a wish addressed to a supernatural Being.

Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble. In this way the pursuit of science leads to a religious feeling of a special sort, which is indeed quite different from the religiosity of someone more naïve.²¹

His concept of 'cosmic religion' required no place of worship, sacred scripture, or religious dogma. 'It is very difficult to elucidate this [cosmic religious] feeling to anyone who is entirely without it,' he wrote.²²

Over the years, he had to clarify his religious views to others. One very skeptical guest at a dinner party in Berlin was surprised to learn from Einstein himself that he was religious: 'Yes, you can call it that. Try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature and you will find that, behind all the discernible laws and connections, there remains something subtle, intangible and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion. To that extent I am, in fact, religious.'²³

Einstein visualized the universe as a rational entity that exhibits superior intelligence and reason. These words of his are often quoted: 'The individual feels the vanity of human desires and aims, and the nobility and marvelous order which are revealed in nature and the world of thought. He feels the individual destiny as an imprisonment and seeks to experience the totality of existence as a unity full of significance.'²⁴ 'My religiosity consists of a human admiration of the infinitely superior spirit that reveals itself in the little that we can comprehend of the knowable world. The deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God.'²⁵

Harmony of Science and Religion

To Einstein, science and religion were complementary. He gives us an exact visualization of the interdependence of science and religion: 'Science without religion is lame—religion without science is blind' (213). He believed that the cosmic religious feeling provides the motivation in all scientific projects. Einstein writes: 'I assert that the cosmic religious experience is the strongest and noblest driving force behind scientific research. ... The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man's image. In

The worshipful Lord said: Generally speaking, persons endowed with the capacity to investigate the truth of things, lift themselves from the evils of instinctive life by their own discriminative power. They need no teacher for this. While even lower creatures are capable of looking after their own welfare to some extent, human beings, endowed with intelligence and discrimination, can surely be their own teacher, for they are capable of achieving the ultimate good through observation and inference. The human being has one more possibility; the wise ones among them can realize, hidden within oneself, Me, the infinite Being, endowed with all powers, by becoming masters of the science and technique of spirituality.

—Bhagavata, 11.7.19–21

my view it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it.'²⁶

His humility was born of his awareness of the stupendous vastness of a superior power behind all phenomena. Max Born said of him, 'He knew, as did Socrates, that we know nothing.'²⁷ Einstein never lost his holy curiosity in the hope of unravelling that mystery. The intuitive flash that led him to the special theory of relativity in 1905 at the age of twenty-six—'Time cannot be absolutely defined, and there is an inseparable relation between time and signal velocity' (that is, two events that appear to be simultaneous to one spectator will not appear to be simultaneous to another spectator who is moving rapidly)²⁸—was a great imaginative leap in science. This momentous insight was a strange and compelling birth pang that signalled the culmination of his lifelong spiritual hunger and thirst.

He confided to a Berlin colleague that he had discovered the theory of relativity because of his firm conviction about 'the harmony of the universe'.²⁹ It may be said, 'Science improves the means; religion makes the man human.' Einstein, like T H Huxley, was fully conscious of the limitations of science. It was Huxley's feeling that, however great, science 'could never lay its hands, could never touch, even

with the tip of its finger, that dream with which our little life is rounded' (414). Einstein agreed: 'The cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research.'³⁰ There was no conflict between his humble faith in a greater Reality and his life as a scientist. He was able to reconcile the two: 'Science can be created only by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration toward truth and understanding. This source of feeling, however, springs from the sphere of religion' (*ibid.*).

He remained a votary of truth at the altar of the supreme mysterious Entity pervading the universe. His deep spiritual convictions, his utter unselfishness that spurned name and fame, and his dedication to human welfare remind us of an ideal Indian sage committed to plain living and high thinking. Though immersed in secular life, to many he appeared to have an aura of holiness. The author C P Snow wrote, 'To me, he appears as, out of comparison, the greatest intellect of this century and almost certainly the greatest personification of moral experience. He was in many ways different from the rest of the species'.³¹



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(Continued from page 443)

Above this house there is space, above that house there is space, above all houses there is space—that is inference. Likewise absolute Truth means pure Consciousness, the ground of every being. That is our state, all other things come and go, they are temporary, changing.

The one thing that does not change is awareness, Consciousness. You are the observer, you are the witness, you are the seer, you are the one who experiences, you are the Ground, unrelated to this entire panorama. That is your true state and that is the true state of all of us. What is changing is changing in you and in me, what is permanent is the same

in you and in me.

There is essentially no difference between two persons, only temporarily is there a little difference. This helps us to understand many things. We can learn to live in peace with others when we understand this logic properly.

This understanding is religion, this is what is to be realized—by what method? By silencing all impressions, all modifications, by holding on to yourself. A time comes when everything is silenced. In your deeper contemplation you become aware of samadhi; you experience that state, pure Consciousness, nothing else. You feel the pure conscious state and you say: 'I am that.'



Ramakrishna's Influence on Girish's Plays

Swami Chetanananda

At the advent of an avatar, or divine incarnation, a renaissance occurs, a new civilization begins, and a cultural revival takes place. Although Christ's public life

lasted only three years, his contribution to the world of thought and culture was immense. His life and teachings have been sources of inspiration for countless artists in every field—painters, sculptors, architects, poets, writers, musicians, actors, and dramatists. Two thousand years have passed, and still people are writing books and composing songs about him. Painters and sculptors still strive to depict his form. In the same way, avatars like Rama, Krishna, and Buddha, who lived before Christ, still inspire artists all over the world.

Ramakrishna was born at a critical period in Indian history. Western culture and civilization were spreading rapidly throughout Indian society, and Christian missionaries were working hard to convert the population. Ramakrishna's divine life and his spiritual teachings touched people's hearts and restored their faith in their culture and religious heritage. He had a great influence on many social and religious leaders.

Ramakrishna is a living force even now: his ideas are growing and spreading day by day. His life is like a dazzling diamond with many facets, each one revealing one of his talents. Once Swami Vivekananda remarked: 'The artistic faculty was highly developed in our Lord, Sri Ramakrishna, and he used to say that without this faculty none

can be truly spiritual.'¹ Although Ramakrishna was mostly in a god-intoxicated mood, his artistic talents permeated his life.

Ramakrishna encouraged and supported the artists, writers, actors, singers, dancers, and musicians who came to visit him. Girish once said: 'I learned how to write drama and how to act from Sri Ramakrishna.' M, who was a schoolteacher, said: 'I learned how to teach in school from Sri Ramakrishna.' And Swami Vivekananda said: 'I learned how to reason scientifically from Sri Ramakrishna.'²

Professor Nalini Ranjan Chattopadhyay has written a book called *Sri Ramakrishna O Banga Rangamancha* (Sri Ramakrishna and the Bengali Stage). This book, written in Bengali, describes the tremendous influence that Ramakrishna had on the actors, actresses, and musicians of Bengal. Ramakrishna is worshipped as the patron deity of the stage; even today many Bengali actors and actresses bow down to his picture before going onstage, continuing a tradition started by Girish. Ramakrishna gave these actresses his blessings and approval, thereby gaining for them society's approval as well. He acknowledged the talent involved in acting and elevated actresses to a higher status, thus bringing about a revival of the Bengali stage.

Girish wrote roughly ninety plays, some before meeting Ramakrishna, but most of them afterwards. It is wonderful to see how he incorporated Ramakrishna's ideas into his plays—the ideal of religious harmony, as well as his spiritual teachings on faith, devotion, renunciation, self-surrender—sometimes even his very words. But more important, Girish showed how a real guru rescues his disciples from temptation and sin and transforms their lives. He introduced Swami Vivekananda's spirit of service

in some of his plays; and he also created characters based on devotees of the Master, such as Latu and Pagalini. In some plays we watch Girish depict his own character, his grief and pain, his faith and devotion, and his transformation through the guru's grace. Girish was with the Master from September 1884 to August 1886. During that time he received the Master's unbounded love, affection, and grace.

Ramakrishna selected some of his disciples to spread his message. Before he passed away, he wrote on a piece of paper, 'Narendra will teach people.' He had already told M: 'God binds the Bhagavata pandit to the world with one tie; otherwise, who would remain to explain the sacred book? He keeps the pandit bound for the good of men. That is why the Divine Mother has kept you in the world.'³ When Girish wanted to give up the theatre and become a monk, the Master told him: 'No, no! Let things be as they are. People will learn much from your plays.'⁴

The theatre and other popular media are very powerful tools for spreading a message to the masses. Girish was a genius: he was not only a superb playwright, but also a great poet and composer of songs, a novelist, essayist, and storyteller. Girish's powers of observation and mimicry, and his capacity to assimilate his guru's ideas and incorporate them in his plays were remarkable. Unfortunately only a few of Girish's plays have been translated into other languages. This article presents a few passages from some of the plays in which the reader will find Ramakrishna's influence.

Vilwamangal Thakur

Ramakrishna saw Girish's *Chaitanya Lila* in September 1884. In April 1885 he developed cancer, so when Girish's *Prabhas Yajna* was staged in May 1885, he could not go to see it. During the Master's illness, Girish wrote two more dramas: *Buddhadev Charit* and *Vilwamangal Thakur*. The latter was first staged on 12 June 1886 at the Star Theatre at 68 Beadon Street, while Ramakrishna was alive. The main themes of this drama are love and renunciation; the story is taken from *Bhaktamala* (A Garland of Devotees).

One day when Girish was depressed he went to see the Master. To alleviate his depression, the Master told Girish the story of Vilwamangal and asked him to base a drama on it.⁵ The Master described to Girish the nature of a real saint and also the character of a false monk. He himself showed this to Girish by demonstrating the gestures and deportment of a hypocritical monk. Girish depicted this monk in the character of Sadhak in *Vilwamangal Thakur*. He also created a character named Pagalini in this drama. This role was based on a disturbed woman who would come to Ramakrishna in Dakshineswar and Cossipore and harass him. The devotees called her Pagalini (crazy woman). Girish had observed her devotion and longing for God, and he dramatized this in that character. He also composed some songs that the character sang in the drama; these songs describe the different stages of sadhana.

After seeing *Vilwamangal Thakur* performed, a philosopher said to Girish: 'Sir, the purpose of writing *Vilwamangal* has been fulfilled by one sentence in the drama: "The result of the vision of Krishna is the vision of Krishna and nothing else." If one has the vision of God once, that experience never goes away. After seeing and reading *Vilwamangal* many times, Swami Vivekananda remarked: 'Girish's *Vilwamangal* surpassed the plays of Shakespeare. I have never read a book with such lofty ideas.'⁶ Chandrakanta Basu, a famous writer and critic, said: '*Vilwamangal* is Girish's masterpiece.'⁷



The Main characters:

Vilwamangal, a young and wealthy Brahmin

Sadhak, a hypocritical monk

Somagiri, an honest monk

Banik, a merchant

Rakhal, who is Krishna in disguise as a cowherd

Bhikshuk, a thief

Chintamani, a courtesan

Thak, a companion of Chintamani

Ahalya, the wife of Banik

Pagalini, an unbalanced woman

Girish portrayed himself in the character of Vilwamangal, and Ramakrishna was portrayed in

that of Somagiri. Here is a brief synopsis of the five-act play:

Act One • It is night. Vilwamangal goes to Chintamani's house, but the door is closed. Chintamani is eating her dinner, so she opens the door after a long time. Vilwamangal is hurt and feels he was neglected. They argue, but it is clear that they love each other.

The next morning Bhikshuk sings a song that explains to Vilwamangal the nature of love: it flows like the ebb and tide of the ocean. Vilwamangal cannot visit Chintamani that night because his father died. He hires Bhikshuk to watch the courtesan's house.

Act Two • Sadhak goes to Chintamani's house, where he falls in love with Thak. Sadhak says that he wants to teach Thak about the love of Radha and Krishna. He suggests that she think of herself as Radha and him as Krishna. Sadhak also tells her that he will teach her how to turn copper into gold and become rich. The conversation between Thak and Sadhak is very entertaining. Girish beautifully portrayed how a hypocritical monk enjoys lust and gold while wearing the garb of a monk. Sadhak then tries to persuade Bhikshuk to be his disciple.

Night falls, and a rainstorm sets in. After performing the shraddha ceremony for his dead father, Vilwamangal wants to be with Chintamani, so he leaves home. No boatman dares to ferry him across the river in the storm, so he swims across by holding onto a corpse, thinking it to be a log. He then scales Chintamani's wall by holding onto the tail of a cobra, which he takes to be a rope. The next morning Vilwamangal and Chintamani discover what he has done.

Chintamani tells him: 'Really, you are mad with love. You have no shame, no fear. You mistook the snake for a rope, and the corpse for a log. Look, I am a prostitute. We only feign love, but your love is genuine. If you would give your mind to God instead of me, you would see God.'

Vilwamangal replies: 'You are right. I really am madly in love with you. I have given you my money and everything else. When you sleep, I gaze at your face the whole night. When you heave a sigh, I see

darkness all around. If I see tears in your eyes, I feel as if someone were piercing my heart with a spear. All along I have worshipped your beauty. Now I see this is all maya.'

Thus the courtesan becomes Vilwamangal's first guru.

The next day Vilwamangal renounces his home and his wealth, even his beloved Chintamani. He then begins to search desperately for a guru: 'Now I have no one in this world. There must be someone. Within this thick cloud of my mind I can't see anybody, but from my heart someone is telling me, "I am with you". Please do thou reveal thyself to me. I want to offer my heart and soul to you so that I can have peace. O my Lord, my heart is empty; I see darkness all around; I can't live here anymore. I am alone in this world.'⁸

Chintamani cries out: 'Where are you going? What is this? Are you going to renounce me? I see now I have no one.'

Act Three • Vilwamangal meets Somagiri, who immediately recognizes him as a god-intoxicated man. Vilwamangal addresses him as 'guru', but Somagiri replies that he is not the guru; only Krishna is the guru. Somagiri gives shelter to Vilwamangal and advises him to call on Krishna.

Meanwhile, Chintamani laments: 'I am a sinner. I have hurt and betrayed so many people in my life. I am a loveless prostitute. I have known neither how to give love nor how to accept love. If God loves me, shall I be able to accept it?' Thak tries to console her, saying that Vilwamangal will be back—and if he does not return, she can trap another man. However, Chintamani now feels drawn towards renunciation, and she gives some of her jewellery to Pagalini. Thak becomes jealous and plots with Sadhak to steal the courtesan's money and jewellery. She asks Sadhak to put on torn ochre clothes, like a poor monk, and visit Chintamani that evening. He is to address her as 'mother' and talk to her about Krishna's love. Then Chintamani will give him some money. The two plan to poison Chintamani later on and take all her wealth.

Elsewhere, Vilwamangal is beginning his sadhana,

repeating his mantra day and night and eating food from the garbage with the dogs. He struggles to keep his mind focussed on Krishna. One day he is seated near a pond when he hears the sweet sound of a woman's anklets. He opens his eyes and sees Ahalya, the wife of Banik, who has come to bathe there. Seeing her beauty, Vilwamangal's old desires return. Aghast, he resolves to punish his eyes, which have become his enemies. He follows Ahalya to her house and meets her husband, whom he asks to allow him to see Ahalya privately. Banik is deeply virtuous and a wealthy businessman; he thinks that God is testing him, so he does not object. When Vilwamangal and Ahalya are alone together, Vilwamangal asks Ahalya to give him two of her hairpins and then return to her husband. As soon as she leaves, he pushes the hairpins into his eyes, blinding himself. He then leaves the house, asking Krishna to guide him.

That evening Sadhak sneaks into Chintamani's house and puts deadly poison in the courtesan's milk. Thak and Sadhak plan to kill Chintamani and bury her body on the bank of the river. Bhikshuk is hiding behind some bushes and he hears their conversation. He considers warning Chintamani.

Chintamani soliloquizes: 'The day is gone and night has come. This is a house of ill-fame and I shall have to sleep alone. If someone kills me for my money then I shall lose this life and the next one. O mind, you injured so many people for money, and now that money has become your enemy. When Vilwamangal was with me, I had no fear or worry. He loved me and protected me. Vilwamangal loved my beauty and that beauty is my enemy. What shall I do now? Who will save a great sinner like me? I shall go to Vilwamangal. He is a holy man and will not hate me. He will take care of my next life. I am a helpless, single woman. Who will guide me?'

Pagalini arrives and comforts her: 'My daughter, I have been watching you. Don't worry about food and shelter. Look, even that jackal and the birds eat and have places to live.' When Chintamani invites Pagalini to her house, she declines to go because she knows through her yogic power that Thak and Sadhak have plotted to poison her. She tells Chinta-

mani about the plot. Chintamani then throws her keys and jewellery on the floor and leaves for Vrindaban with Pagalini and Bhikshuk. Bhikshuk secretly picks up the jewellery and puts it in his bag.

Act Four • Thak and Sadhak enter Chintamani's room. Her iron safe is installed in the wall. Thak tells Sadhak to break into the safe with an axe because they have no key. When they are breaking into the safe, a police officer and two constables enter the room.

The officer asks: 'Who are you? Why are you stealing Chintamani's money and jewellery? I shall arrest you both.'

Thak says that she is Chintamani's tenant and niece. Sadhak says that he is Chintamani's godson. Seeing that they don't have a key, the officer orders his men to arrest both of them. He tells them to put Sadhak into prison and bring Thak to his house. The officer plans to take all of Chintamani's money and report that the money was stolen by thieves. Meanwhile, Sadhak takes out some poison. He gives some to Thak, and they both commit suicide.

On the way to Vrindaban, Pagalini leaves Chintamani and asks her to continue alone. Bhikshuk, however, continues the journey with her.

One day seeing her husband's grey hair, Ahalya teases Banik: 'You are getting old. It is wonderful that you will not be able to marry again.'

Banik replies: 'You are right. This grey hair reminds me that death is approaching. All these years I have enjoyed lust and gold. I don't enjoy this worldly life any more. It is time for me to go somewhere.'

Ahalya responds: 'Wherever you go, I shall be with you.'

Banik says: 'Let us go to Vrindaban.'

Rakhal appears. He is pleased that the merchant couple is planning to go to Vrindaban. Rakhal addresses Ahalya as 'mother', melting her heart. He introduces himself as a cowherd and says that he found a blind man in the nearby forest who does nothing but cry for Krishna. The man wants to go to Vrindaban. Ahalya thinks that it must be that great soul who took her hairpins and made himself blind. Banik tells Rakhal that they will be going

to Vrindaban by boat and they would be happy to take that holy man with them. Rakhal goes to the forest to meet Vilwamangal and convince him to go to Vrindaban with them.

Act Five • The courtesan arrives in Vrindaban wearing only a plain sari and without any money or jewellery. She covers her beauty with ashes and is about to cut her hair when Rakhal appears and grabs the scissors.

Chintamani: 'Who are you, my boy?'

Rakhal: 'I am a cowherd. Do you love Krishna or me?'

Chintamani: 'I am a loveless, wretched, fallen woman. I don't know how to love Krishna.'

Rakhal: 'You are now in Vrindaban. Tell me, do you want Krishna or me?'

Chintamani: 'I want Krishna, but I love you.'

Bhikshuk arrives and tries to befriend Rakhal. Rakhal tells him that if he wants to be his friend, he will have to give up the bag he carries, in which he is hiding Chintamani's jewellery. Rakhal then leaves.

Pagalini and Somagiri, accompanied by his disciple, reach Vrindaban. Chintamani is happy to see Pagalini because it was she who advised her to come to Vrindaban. Chintamani asks Somagiri: 'Is there any hope for me to receive the grace of Krishna?'

Somagiri: 'My mother, you have such intense love that Krishna will definitely shower his mercy on you.'

Chintamani: 'Father, show me the way to attain Krishna.'

Somagiri: 'Mother, there is a holy man in Vrindaban named Vilwamangal. Take refuge in him.'

Chintamani: 'Father, you are my guru. I am a great sinner and I ill-treated him innumerable times.'

Somagiri: 'Mother, he is a great sadhu. A real holy man is always forgiving.' Pagalini promises to accompany Chintamani to see Vilwamangal.

Vilwamangal is seated alone in the forest of Vrindaban; he has been there for seven days without food, crying for Krishna and contemplating a fast until death. Rakhal appears with milk in hand and begins to feed him. While Rakhal is giving him milk, Vilwamangal grabs his hand, as he is con-

vinced that Rakhal is Krishna himself.

Rakhal: 'What are you doing? Let go of my hand. You're hurting me.'

When Vilwamangal loosens his grip a little, Rakhal runs away.

Vilwamangal: 'O my beloved Gopala, Krishna! You have snatched your hand away from me. Look, you revealed your love after making me cry. Now I shall tie you in my heart. Let me see how you can run away from there! Although I am blind, I shall catch you.'

Rakhal (*standing behind a tree*): 'Let me see how you can catch me.'

Following the sound of his voice, Vilwamangal moves forward. Rakhal immediately takes the form of Krishna and returns Vilwamangal's sight. The man is overwhelmed by seeing the beautiful divine form of Krishna.

Rakhal says to Vilwamangal: 'I hear some people coming. Let me hide myself, but I shall always be with you.'

Ahalya and her husband approach Vilwamangal, and then Chintamani, Pagalini, and Bhikshuk arrive.

Vilwamangal: 'I have seen the beautiful form of Krishna!'

Somagiri and his disciple then come on the scene.

Somagiri says to his disciple: 'Krishna wanted to teach us renunciation through this courtesan and debauchee. (*Pointing to Vilwamangal*) Look, he is the embodiment of renunciation. We shall see Krishna by the grace of Chintamani and Vilwamangal.'

Disciple: 'Master, I am sorry that I looked down upon them. Now I will bow down to them. Please tell me, what is the result of the vision of Krishna?'

Somagiri: 'The result of the vision of Krishna is Krishna *darshan* [the vision of Krishna].'

Chintamani to Vilwamangal: 'O monk, look at me. I am your maid, seeking refuge at your feet. Be compassionate to me. If you reject me, I shall kill myself. I have come to you expecting so much—to see Krishna. Be gracious to me.'

Vilwamangal: 'Aha! Who has uttered Krishna's

name in my ear? (*Seeing Chintamani*) Who is this? My guru who taught me love? Have mercy on me. Vilwamangal bows down to Chintamani.

Chintamani: 'O my beloved Master, please don't turn me away. You are a yogi, a great lover of God. You have seen Krishna. Now share your Krishna with me.'

Vilwamangal: 'O beloved, Krishna is in your heart. Call on him wholeheartedly and you will see him.'

Chintamani: 'O Krishna, do thou reveal yourself to me. You love your devotees. If you do not reveal to me, your devotee's words will be false. O Rakhal, I did not recognize you, but now I know you are Krishna. Please reveal yourself to me.'

At that moment Krishna and Radha appear on the stage. Vilwamangal and Chintamani, Somagiri and his disciple, Pagalini and Bhikshuk, Banik and Ahalya—all see Radha and Krishna.⁹



Girish ingeniously transformed a short love story into a full-fledged five-act play. In it, he beautifully portrayed how sinners could become saints and how Vilwamangal's and Chintamani's devo-

tion and renunciation helped others to see God. As Somagiri went to see Vilwamangal, so the Master went to see Girish at the theatre.

(To be continued)

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Sri Ramakrishna arrived at the Star Theatre on Bea-
don Street in Calcutta to see a play about the life
of Prahlada. M., Baburam, Narayan, and other devotees
were with him. The hall was brightly lighted. The play
had not yet begun. The Master was seated in a box, talk-
ing with Girish.

MASTER (smiling): 'Ah! You have written nice plays.'

GIRISH: 'But, sir, how little I assimilate! I just write.'

MASTER: 'No, you assimilate a great deal. The other day I said to you that no one could sketch a divine character unless he had love of God in his heart' ...

GIRISH: 'I often ask myself, "Why bother about the theatre any more?"'

MASTER: 'No, no! Let things be as they are. People will learn much from your plays' ...

MASTER (to Girish): 'One can realize God through intense renunciation. But the soul must be restless for Him, as restless as one feels for a breath of air when one's head is pressed under water.'

'A man can see God if he unites in himself the force of

these three attractions: the attraction of worldly possessions for the worldly man, the husband's attraction for the chaste wife, and the child's attraction for its mother. If you can unite these three forms of love and give it all to God, then you can see Him at once. ...

'The other day I told you the meaning of bhakti. It is to adore God with body, mind, and words. "With body" means to serve and worship God with one's hands, go to holy places with one's feet, hear the chanting of the name and glories of God with one's ears, and behold the divine image with one's eyes. "With mind" means to contemplate and meditate on God constantly and to remember and think of His lila. "With words" means to sing hymns to Him and chant His name and glories.'

'Devotion as described by Narada is suited to the Kaliyuga. It means to chant constantly the name and glories of God. Let those who have no leisure worship God at least morning and evening by whole-heartedly chanting His name and clapping their hands.'

—From *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, chapter 35

REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



Mystical Elements in English Poetry

Visvanath Chatterjee

Vivekananda Book Centre, 12A Bankim Chatterjee Street, Kolkata 700 073. 2007. xii + 211 pp. Rs 450 (hardback), Rs 180 (paperback).

‘Mysticism,’ says Professor Visvanath Chatterjee, ‘is a tendency to look beyond and go beyond the here and now. A poet often does this in his poetry and to that extent he becomes a mystic. This is the reason why much of poetry is, in a sense, by itself essentially mystical. The poet has the mystical power which enables him to discover an ocean in a drop of water or, as Blake puts [it], “to see a world in a grain of sand”’.

This is the perspective which forms, as it were, the fulcrum of this absorbing study of mystical elements in English poetry. Consisting of six close-knit, well-structured chapters, it traces the many phases of mysticism in English poetry. A versatile scholar—whose other books, especially *Ten Essays on Shakespeare*, are among the most original Indian criticisms of English literary texts—Prof. Chatterjee shows a unique freshness in balancing the views of Western scholars on mysticism with those of Indian authors who have done outstanding work in this area. For instance, it is gratifying to find the insights of stalwarts such as Radhakamal Mukherjee and Sisir Kumar Ghose alongside acknowledged authorities like Evelyn Underhill and W T Stace.

The first chapter is a micro introduction to the macro world of conceptual and ‘visionary’ approaches to what mysticism is and what its articulation in poetry means. The second chapter focuses on ‘The Medieval and Metaphysical Poets’, and portrays such relevant figures as Langland, Spenser, and Shakespeare. As for the metaphysical poets, Prof. Chatterjee rightly corrects Dr Johnson’s magisterial observation that they ‘were men of learning’, and that ‘to show their learning was their whole endeavour’. This is a partial perspective. For, as Prof. Chatterjee

shows in his incisive critique of Donne, Herbert, and Vaughan, they were also capable of fusing ‘thought with sensation and emotion’.

The third chapter deals with ‘The Romantic Poets’, a fertile ground for mysticism. It is a pleasure to read the familiar poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley, alongside the in-depth study of their mystical elements. One example: in evaluating ‘Adonais’ of Shelley, Prof. Chatterjee draws attention to ‘the remarkable mingling of the physical and the spiritual which is perhaps the most distinctive mystical quality’ of the poem. The Platonic and the erotic come together to create the complex harmony of ‘Adonais’, arguably the most remarkable elegy in English poetry.

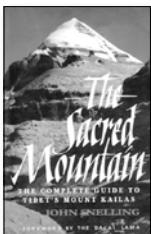
The fourth chapter examines ‘The Victorian Poets’, and the fifth ‘The Modern Poets’. Prof. Chatterjee considers Tennyson ‘a direct descendant of Keats’ and Browning ‘of Shelley’. It is, however, Francis Thompson who is the most mystical of all Victorians and, indeed, as Prof. Chatterjee rightly says, ‘The Hound of Heaven’ is ‘undoubtedly one of the greatest religious poems in the English language,’ evoking ‘the agony of the mystic in “the war within”’.

The penultimate chapter, on modern poets, includes not only T S Eliot and W B Yeats but also Kathleen Raine, who is generally not much noticed. The final chapter is, again, a comprehensive in-depth study of ‘The Mystical Tradition in Poetry’, a remarkable summing up of the entire tradition of Western—not necessarily insularly English—tradition of mystical poetry.

The volume also contains four appendices, four rather practical critiques of (i) Tagore’s *Gitanjali*; (ii) ‘Kali the Mother’, an extraordinarily powerful poem by Swami Vivekananda; (iii) Sri Aurobindo’s epic *Savitri*; and (iv) a refreshing choice: ‘The Song of Silence’, by Shree Purohit Swami.

Prof. Chatterjee’s study is an indispensable volume for academics; but what is more, it is a fascinating study for all lovers of poetry.

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The Sacred Mountain

John Snelling

Motilal Banarsi das, 41 U A Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi 110 062. 2006. xx + 457 pp. Rs 995.

This book is a compendium of travel accounts on Kailas, starting from the early eighteenth century. Travellers have undertaken the journey to Tibet with diverse agenda—exploration, adventure, commerce, political and military reconnaissance, and pilgrimage. The record of journeys begins in 1715 with Western travellers and ends in 1945 with the accounts of Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims. The Second World War and the Chinese annexation of Tibet temporarily stopped these journeys till 1981, when Kailas was again opened to foreign pilgrims. The backdrop to these narratives is provided by the religious associations that the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Bon-po traditions have with Kailas. And the last chapter is devoted to an analysis of the reasons why mountains evoke spiritual feelings in humans, the intensity of these feelings varying with one's psychological make-up.

In the initial years, exploration of the uncharted geographical terrain of Western Tibet was the predominant impulse behind travelling to Tibet. However, Augusto Gansser, a Swiss, was the only trained geologist to venture into Tibet and circumambulate Kailas. He entered forbidden Tibet disguised as a Lama in 1936. The apparently potbellied Lama hid all his geological equipment—which included sketch-book, hammer, aneroid, field glasses, Leica, and even a bottle of hydrochloric acid—under his sheepskin caftan. About the structure of Kailas he writes: 'Strangely enough, it consists of horizontally stratified conglomerate masses with erratic admixture. In the course of geological aeons, these strata have been elevated many thousands of feet without any change in the horizontal lay-out.' As he reached the north face, he saw that this crown of layered rock sat atop a granite pediment 'like a hat' rising straight up for several thousand feet. Mount Kailas is separated from the Kailas range in the east by the eastern valley beyond Dolma Pass. The Indian continental plate ends in this range. As he came down into the eastern valley, more surprise awaited him: 'The strata of the conglomerate, which had hitherto been horizontal, are somewhat inclined, as if by pressure from the south. As we negotiate a curve in the valley, this impression is confirmed,

and suddenly I come across a most interesting geological phenomenon. At a well-marked transitional line, the conglomerate strata have been covered by a number of convoluted strata sharply contrasting with the flat Transhimalayan sedimentary rocks, and the granites. Compared with the Transhimalayan rocks, this superimposed series must have undergone recent and intensive convolution. These observations show that we have to do with the northernmost vestiges of the Himalayan chain proper, which has been superimposed upon the Transhimalaya from the south—backwards, that is to say.'

Satellite images of the Kailas region and observations from the ground reveal the following features: (1) The convoluted layers described by Gansser are the ends of the Indian plate that folds on itself and rises up as it hits the Kailas region, taking a petal-like appearance round Kailas and enclosing a cold region of ice and snow. (2) The western and eastern ridges made of sedimentary rock take the form of the two sides of the *gauripatta*, the base of the linga, between which a stream flows to Manas Sarovar through low grassland. (3) These two ridges have numerous caves and are criss-crossed by water channels. The inner aspect of these ridges has numerous glacial deposits even in summer. The ridges are criss-crossed by water channels and honeycombed by caves which, it is popularly believed, are peopled by the spirits of ancient rishis. The entire geological structure around Kailas appears like a cooling machine and may explain the perennial snow on the linga amid dreary sun-scorched valleys and mountains.

Is the granite pediment of Kailas the primordial *svayambhu-linga*? The Indian continental plate added the crown of layered rocks topped by perennial snow. Gansser felt that the layered rocks are so regular and precisely placed that they seemed to have been arranged by superhuman hands.

Is geology relevant to religious imagery? The author does seem to think so. Shiva has been conceived of in many forms since antiquity and most of them have some connection or the other with Kailas. When one is standing face to face and witnessing the linga at close range, the mountain seems to breathe like a huge prehistoric life-form, sitting atop its Himalayan perch and smiling at human folly.

The book by John Snelling is a thought provoking work, extensively embellished with beautiful photographs.

Dr Saibal Gupta
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REPORTS

Centenary Celebration

Ramakrishna Math, Nattarampalli, celebrated its centenary from 2 to 4 May 2008. Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, presided



New mobile dispensary

over the several functions, inaugurated a new school building, and dedicated a new mobile dispensary. As part of the celebrations, a Teachers' Convention, a Farmer's Convention, and an Agri Expo were held, with several monks and local dignitaries participating. Besides, the Math distributed Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature to 10 college libraries, 150 saris to needy women of the nearby colony, a number of goats to 24 poverty-stricken tribal families, and mango and *chikku* (sapota) saplings to farmers. A blood donation camp was also organized on the occasion.



Villupattu:
narration of
the life and
teachings of Sri
Ramakrishna
with traditional
instruments, at
Nattarampalli

Inaugurations

Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated a new building for the boys' high school and co-educational junior basic school at



Swami Smarananandaji inaugurates the
centenary celebrations of Ramakrishna Math, Nattarampalli

Matri Mandir and Ramakrishna Mission Sarada Sevashrama, Jayrambati, on 9 June. Dr Asim Dasgupta, Finance Minister, West Bengal, was the guest-in-chief on the occasion. Revered Maharaj also inaugurated a newly constructed building for office and a showroom for books and Pallimangal products at **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Kamarpukur**, on 18 June.

Achievements

Tirtharaj Dhar, a class-4 student of **Viveknagar Vidyalaya, Tripura**, secured the 7th all-India rank in the National Level Science Talent Search Examination conducted by the Unified Council. The council adjudged the Vidyalaya as the 'Best Participation School'. In the same examination at state level, the first ten positions were secured by students of the Vidyalaya as follows: class-8: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 6th, and 9th; class-10: 5th, 7th, and 10th. At the All India Engineering Entrance Examination 2008, students of the school stood 1st, 4th, 6th, and 7th.

The National Olympiad Foundation, New Delhi, judged **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Purulia**, as the 'Best Performing School' in West Bengal at the international Mathematics Olympiad Test 2007. Digantanil Giri, a class-7 student of the Vidyapith, secured the 1st position in his group in the state, and the 44th rank at the international level.

Anupam Dev Goyal, a student of the students' home at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh**, secured the 2nd position in the All India Engineering Entrance Examination of the present year.



Meditation at Belgaum

Summer Camps

The following centres conducted summer camps for children that included practice of yogasanas, prayers, bhajans, Vedic chanting, and cultural activities: Belgaum: 30 days, 135 boys; Chennai Math: 31 days, 400 children; Hyderabad: 30 days, 1,120 children; Porbandar: 37 days, 60 students; Rajahmundry: 31 days, 200 students; Rajkot: 26 days, 130 children; Thrissur: 7 days, 202 students.



Yogasanas at Rajahmundry

Relief

Flood Relief . Torrential rains during the month of June have caused havoc in West Bengal and nearby states. Thousands of people were severely affected, becoming homeless. Details of the relief activities carried out by centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, as of 1 July, are as follows: Ghatshila centre served food items four times a day during 5 days to 82 flood victims whose houses in Dahigora locality on the bank of Subarnarekha River had been washed away in the flood. Jamshedpur centre distributed to 1,030 flood victims belonging to 5 villages of East Singhbhum and Sarailkela-Kharawalan districts the following: 1,260 kg rice, 202 kg dal, 60 kg potatoes, 5 kg spices, 5 kg chira, 4 kg sugar, and 30 sets of utensils (each set containing 1 *handi*, 1 *karai*, 1 *khunti*, 1 *hata*, 6 plates, and 5 glasses). Besides, the centre gave assorted clothes to 355 persons and treated 131 patients. Belgharia centre dispensed 26,910 kg chira, 72 kg milk powder, 2,691 kg sugar, 3,570 packets of biscuits, 3,570 candles, 7,140 matchboxes, and 357,000 halogen tablets to 18,620

Flood relief operations at Chandipur



Appeal

The Ramakrishna Mission appeals to one and all to contribute generously to the flood relief fund. All donations paid in cash or by cheque / demand draft drawn in favour of 'Ramakrishna Mission' and payable at Kolkata are exempt from income tax under section 80-G of the Income Tax Act. Donations may please be sent to: The General Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, Howrah, WB 711 202 (Ph: +91 33 2654 9581 / 9681; Fax: 2654 9885; E-mail: rkmrelief@gmail.com; Website: www.belurmath.org/relief).

flood victims belonging to 11 villages of Dasagram, Gokulpur, and Gopinathpur in Purba Medinipur and Paschim Medinipur districts. Besides, the centre rescued, with the help of a speedboat, 219 persons who were stranded owing to the flood. Chandipur centre handed over 39,500 kg chira, 3,590 kg sugar, 6,360 packets of biscuits, 6,000 candles, 10,200 matchboxes, and 234,000 halogen tablets to 82,052 victims belonging to 83 villages of Bhagawanpur I & II and Chandipur blocks in Purba Medinipur district. Contai centre provided 20,000 kg chira, 5,000 kg sugar, 25 cartons of biscuits, and 200,000 halogen tablets to 8,366 flood-affected families belonging to 75 villages of Egra and Contai sub-divisions in Purba Medinipur district. Medinipur centre gave 51,000 kg chira, 5,100 kg sugar, 3,000 packets of biscuits, and 300,000 halogen tablets to 50,627 victims belonging to 113 villages of Dantan I & II, Keshiari, Narayangarh, and Sabang blocks in Paschim Medinipur district. Narendrapur centre supplied 72,806 plates of cooked food (khichri), 3,265 kg chira, 1,288 kg gur, 17,000 oral rehydration salt packets, 82,000 halogen tablets, 1,750 jerrycans, 72,000 water-purifier packets, and 4,000 kg bleaching powder in Patashpur I & II, Bhagawanpur I & II, Egra I & II, Chandipur, and Panskura I blocks in Purba Medinipur district, and Narayangarh, Sabang, and Debra blocks in Paschim Medinipur district. Tamluk centre contributed 17,363 kg chira, 1,736 kg sugar, and 1,736,300 halogen tablets to 17,363 victims belonging to Pingla block in Paschim Medinipur district.

Tsunami Rehabilitation . To overcome the acute shortage of drinking water in the Andamans, caused by excess of salt in the water of the area by the last tsunami, Port Blair centre has set up a Reverse Osmosis Based Water Treatment Plant for producing potable water from ponds, wells, or rain water, as a part of the Ramakrishna Mission's Tsunami Rehabilitation Project. The production capacity of the plant is 13,000 litres of drinking water per day. ☺